From The Ashes

by nugatory

Summary

What could possibly be more dangerous for Katniss Everdeen than The Hunger Games?

Notes

Katniss' POV. Takes place at the end of Mockingjay when Katniss and Haymitch return to District 12. I own nothing. Please ignore any typos…my brain certainly does.
“Well,” Haymitch’s voice breaks through the haze of my thoughts as we stand in the foyer of my home. I look at his face—half obscured behind a curtain of unwashed dirty blonde hair that hangs in lank strips down to his scruffy chin. His eyes are darting around the room, avoiding looking at me. “See you tomorrow.”

He hoists his bag a little higher on his shoulder as he turns for the door, the clink of the bottles barely muted by the thick canvas encasing them. *Doubt it.* I think as I watch him close the door on his way out.

Except for Greasy Sae and her not-quite-there granddaughter, the house is empty. Despite the fire in the hearth, I feel a chill in my bones and wonder if I will ever feel warm again. I am alone in this world, and everything…*everything* I have done has been in vain. I close my eyes as the memory of Prim, engulfed in flames, takes hold of me. I close my throat around the scream, choking it off and sink to the floor, rocking back on my heels as I cover my ears.

Prim. Finnick. Boggs. Cinna. Castor… The list goes on and on of the people I’ve killed, but somehow, even greater is the loss of the people still alive. The people who have sent me alone to my exile. My mother. Gale. Peeta…

A strange howling, like the sound of a dying animal echoes in the room and I look around to find the source, only to realize it’s coming from me. Suddenly the house feels like a tomb filled with memories of everyone I’ve ever loved, and I can’t stay here. Greasy Sae tries to call me back as I burst through the front door, but I ignore her as my feet propel me forward.

Where? Where am I going? And then I see Haymitch’s lights still burning and I know where I’m going. I don’t bother knocking before I spill in through his front door, slamming it shut behind me as I gasp for air. I’m not winded by the short jog to his house, but by the pain that threatens to suffocate me. Suddenly, I can’t breathe at all and I clutch my chest. My heart is beating too fast, too hard. I try to call out to Haymitch, but I can’t speak. I stagger sideways, knocking into something and hear it fall over and shatter to the floor, but I don’t bother looking to see what it was.

Haymitch appears in the kitchen doorway, a perplexed and wary expression creasing his face before he seems to understand. My vision starts to dim and blur around the edges and I’m filled with the sensation of falling. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I know it’ll hurt if I hit my head again, but before I can even think about bracing myself for impact, I find myself cradled in a strong embrace.

“Breathe,” Haymitch tells me, though he sounds like he’s speaking to me through thick glass. “Breathe, Katniss.”
The faint smell of alcohol assaults my nose, and the only thought I have before everything goes black is that we haven’t even been back in district 12 for half an hour, and he’s already hitting the bottle. *Typical.*

When I come to, my head is pounding and everything seems a shade too bright, even though heavy curtains are drawn over the window. I realize that I’m in bed, but not my bed, and recognize the covers pulled up to my chin. *Haymitch.* I think immediately. I sit up too quickly and nearly pass out again, but a hand steadies my shoulder and Haymitch’s voice is softer than possibly I’ve ever heard it.

“Easy, sweetheart…” He tells me. I feel the bed shift as he sits down next to me, his hand only releasing my shoulder when he feels I’ve regained enough balance to hold myself up.

“What happened?” I ask, feeling foggy and weak.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.” he admits. “You showed up here, hyperventilating, and passed out.”

Then I remember the thoughts that had led to my panic, the feeling of being utterly alone in the world. I feel myself ripping apart at the seams, but before I can fall apart, Haymitch pushes something into my hand.

I stare down at the bottle in confusion.

“Trust me…it’ll help.”

Slowly I begin to understand everything about Haymitch that I had been so blind to before. Whether I didn’t recognize it because of how much I hated him, or just because I was too caught up in my own problems to care, I ignored the very basic reason behind Haymitch’s drinking. Memories flood my mind—watching the tape of Haymitch’s Hunger Games with Peeta, the day he told me of everything the Capital had taken from him after his victory… For 25 years Haymitch has been drowning his pain and suffering at the bottom of a bottle.

I don’t know what prompts me to do what I do next—Pity? Despair? Lunacy?—but I reach up with one hand, cupping it at the back of Haymitch’s neck and drag him forward until our lips meet. His lips are hard against mine and the scratch of his beard irritates my face, but something deep within me doesn’t care. Part of me needs this while the other part of me is repulsed.

“Kiss me,” I whisper against his lips, trying to coax him into kissing me the way I want to be kissed.

“Katniss…” He breathes, trying to gently push me off of him, but I drop the bottle and clasp my hands behind his head.

“Kiss me.” I demand more fiercely, and on impulse I bite down on his lip, though not hard enough to really hurt him.

I hear his sharp intake of breath, and then he’s crushing me against him. His arms are locked around my body and his lips press even harder against mine, but there’s a yielding softness to them now as well. My tongue darts out, wetting his upper lip and then his mouth opens and he’s kissing me so deeply that I moan in response.

I shift onto my knees, wanting to be closer to him, needing to satisfy the burning ache that consumes my entire body. I throw my leg over Haymitch’s, straddling his lap, and this time he moans as I sink down against him. I feel the hardness pressing up between my legs and shove my tongue deep into his mouth as I mash my body against it.

In all the times I’d felt this kind of passion with Peeta, we’d never had the opportunity to do much
more than kiss and touch. Certainly I had never been bold enough to let my body’s need take over
to this point, or if I had started to, Peeta had always put a quick end to it.

Haymitch, on the other hand, was just as starved—if not more so—than I was. His hands travel
down my back and over the back of my pants as he guides my hips against him again. I break
from the kiss, breathless, but not sated as more heat floods down between my legs. I drop my head
back as I move against him again and again. It feels so good and erases the pain entirely, but it’s
not enough. I need more.

I feel Haymitch’s breath against my throat as he kisses the exposed skin, and feel one of his hands
working the fastenings on my pants. Yes… I think, thankful that Haymitch isn’t as noble as Peeta
in this arena. His fingers slip down the front of my pants, working their way beneath my
undergarments, and suddenly he’s fanning the flames that have set me on fire.

Any rational thought or trepidation I might have had about being at Haymitch’s mercy in such a
way abandons me as I give over to the pleasure he’s bestowing upon me. Whether or not
Haymitch has had any sexual experience beyond the girl of his youth remains a mystery, but he
certainly knows what he’s doing now.

I feel myself writhing against him, lost in the insurmountable pleasure emanating from his skillful
touch. I feel like something is building inside of me, a kind of pressure that keeps intensifying with
every stroke. I’m quivering, and whimpering, clinging to Haymitch now as if he’s a lifeline, then
his lips are at my ear and he’s breath is ragged.

“Let go, Katniss.” He whispers.

Let go? I think. Let go of what? And then his fingers pulse upwards and press against something
inside of me that sets off explosions behind my eyes. I cry out and feel every muscle in body seize
up, and the pressure that had been building up spasms out of me in warm, wet waves of ecstasy.
I’m trembling as I start to come down from my high, somehow exhausted whereas moments ago I
had been so alive with my need. I sag against Haymitch, my fingers idly twisting in his hair. He
makes no move to retrieve his fingers from me, but that suits me just fine as I can feel my body
pulsing around his long digits.

I feel myself start to drift off to sleep against him, and that’s when he gently slips his hand from me
and lays me back against the pillow. Irrationally, I reach for him and clutch his shirtsleeve in my
hand. “Don’t go.”

“I’m just going to wash up.” He said, his voice slightly tremulous. “I’ll be back.”

Mollified, I release him and close my eyes against the sleepiness as I listen to him move into the
bathroom. The shower comes on but I never hear it turn off.

I stir when the bed shifts beside me, catch a faint whiff of soap and shampoo and hear Haymitch
exhale as he lies down next to me. I roll over to face him and he looks at me with that same wary
expression he had last night, but I push his arm up out of the way and lay my head on his chest.
“That good isn’t so bad.

I feel myself pulled from sleep, feeling safe and warm and altogether not completely miserable.
Haymitch is still sleeping with is arm draped around me, his nose against my hair. I have to admit
that, even though this is Haymitch, this feels nice. Strange, but nice. Yet, I’m glad he’s sound
asleep, because I have no idea what I’ll say to him once he’s awake. The fact that I used him for
my own benefit isn’t lost on me, and it begins to eat away at the cocoon of contentment I’ve felt
since falling asleep with him. Would Haymitch mind being used? Did he know that’s what I was doing? It hadn’t been my original intent... I had kissed him because I had understood his pain and felt that it was something we both needed. Now...I’m starting to question that.

Guilt begins to gnaw at my gut and I try to carefully slip from under his arm. I need to get out of here before he wakes up and I have to explain myself. Usually Haymitch sleeps like a rock, like a nuclear explosion wouldn’t wake him up, but as I carefully lower his arm back to the bed, his tongue comes out to wet his lips.

“Leaving?” He asks, still half asleep.

“Yes.” I tell him, hoping he won’t ask me to stay.

“’k…” He turns over on his stomach and then he’s out cold once again.

I gawk at him, half confounded and half jealous at his ability to fall asleep so quickly. And he’s not even drunk. My mind quips. I don’t bother with being quiet as I get out of bed, fasten my pants, and swipe a near empty bottle of alcohol from the nightstand. The one I dropped last night lays in a wet heap on the floor. I step over the mess and head for the door, not looking back.

My house is empty, but I find that Greasy Sae has stored the remains of dinner from last night. I don’t bother warming them up as I stand over the sink and eat. Thoughts of Prim, Peeta, and Gale begin to resurface in my mind as I consider what to do with myself for the day and find that everything I’d ever done involved one of the three of them. The thick stew clogs my throat and I twist the cap off of Haymitch’s bottle, draining it to wash down the stew. The alcohol burns, and mixed with the meat in the stew tastes more foul than ever, but I find myself lamenting that I hadn’t grabbed a fuller bottle. I briefly consider going back over to Haymitch’s to pilfer more of his stash, but quickly dismiss it. With nothing better to do, and the suffocating grief of my thoughts pressing down on me, I decide to curl up on the couch and go back to sleep. But the reprieve I found last night in Haymitch’s bed ends here. My dreams are filled with images of Prim on fire, screaming at me, telling me it’s all my fault, that I’ve failed her. Her arms are around me, not to comfort me in her embrace, to make me burn with her. Around us stand all of my victims, the people I’ve murdered, staring on in quiet vengeance. In the background I can see Snow laughing, the blood dripping from his lips, self-assured that he won after all.

I bolt upright, screaming and struggling free of the arms that encase me, crashing to the floor. The blanket that’s covered me tangles around my legs. When I realize it had just been a dream, I break down in sheer agony. I slump to the floor, laying my head against the cool floorboards as I sob uncontrollably for what feels like hours.

I wish I had died in that first arena. Peeta probably wouldn’t have made it out either, but at least nothing after the fact would have happened. District 12 would still be standing, Prim still alive... no one would have died for me...because of me. I could have kept Prim safe if only I’d just died.

Alone and cold and wallowing in my grief, I no longer know how to keep a lid on my emotions. I want to stay on that floor until death finally comes for me, but the ghosts continue to haunt my every thought and I can’t stand it anymore. I push myself to my feet and, with great effort, find myself back at Haymitch’s.

He doesn’t ask me if I’m alright—whether because it’s blatantly obvious that I’m not, or he doesn’t care, or he simply knows exactly how I feel—but we sit in his living room, shoulder to shoulder on the couch and share a bottle of alcohol. We don’t speak, but mostly because neither of us has anything to say and we’ve both never been big on small talk.
The alcohol leaves me hazy but numbed after a while and I sink further into Haymitch’s side, stealing the warmth of his body as my eyes watch the dancing flames in the fireplace. I used to think fire was beautiful…now I hate everything about it. Katniss…the girl who hates fire. I think bitterly.

“Does it ever get easier?” My voice is barely a whisper, but still sounds far too loud in the companionable silence that had preceded it.

Haymitch takes a long pull from the bottle. “No.”

I take the bottle from him and take several small sips. Suddenly I find myself wondering about Haymitch’s love—the one Snow had killed after he’d won the Quarter Quell. “What was her name?”

“Katniss…” he says quietly in warning.

I can’t help myself; a hint of a smirk lifts my lips. “Her name was Katniss?”

Haymitch rips the bottle from my hand as he mutters something under his breath. For a long time he doesn’t answer but then very quietly I hear him say, “Mica.”

Somehow, knowing her name doesn’t feel as satisfying as I thought it might. I tried to imagine what she might look like, how she must have loved Haymitch. I can’t imagine Haymitch being in love, but I know from watching the tape of his Quarter Quell that Haymitch was very different than he is now. The arena changed him…just as it changes all of us.

“I’m sorry.” It seems inadequate, and he merely grunts in response. We’re quiet again as we continue drinking. “You’re a terrible mentor you know.”

He looks at me, his mind slow from the alcohol as he tries to figure out why I would say this to him now.

“You’re advice to us was to stay alive.” I tell him. “If you were a good mentor, you would have told us to blow ourselves up in that 60 seconds before the gong.”

He snorts as he tries not to laugh, but then he can’t stop himself. I can’t remember ever hearing Haymitch laugh before, and marvel at the joyous, infectious sound bubbling out of him. “Can you imagine the look on Snow’s face if all of the tributes blew themselves up before the Games really began?”

We both give into to gales of laughter, talking about the strategy needed to plan such a coup, and what Snow might do to retaliate. It’s a grim topic, but in light of all the recent horrors, oddly humorous. It feels like years since I last laughed, and I feel pleasantly light headed as the endorphins mingle with the alcohol in my system. I’m leaning heavily on Haymitch now, and realize that he’s put his arm around me at some point. We seem to become aware of this at the same time because the smile fades from Haymitch’s face and he starts to move away. I fist my hand around the front of his shirt in a silent plea and he settles his arm back across my shoulders, his forehead falling forward against mine.

“We must be crazy.” He tells me quietly.

And I know it’s true, but I don’t care anymore. “Kiss me.”

I want to feel that same sweet bliss from last night, the euphoria that wiped away all of my despair. I want to escape from Hell with him and forget everything.
This time Haymitch doesn’t protest. His lips are on mine as desperately as mine are on his, and we kiss each other into a frenzy. That throbbing ache starts low and dull between my legs, and I quickly straddle his lap as I did last night, moving against him to relieve the ache. Haymitch’s hands carefully slip underneath the hem of my shirt, his warm palms flat against my back. I moan softly into his mouth, deciding I like the way he touches me, and it seems to encourage him. His fingers gently knead the muscles on either side of my spine as he works them upwards. His tongue is rolling around my mouth, nearly as intoxicating as the alcohol. When his finger traces the band of my bra, over my ribcage, and along the cup, it’s nearly all I can do not to rip my clothes off.

Haymitch’s hand gently closes over my breast, squeezing gently, thumb stroking my nipple through the garment and lighting a whole new fire within me. I break the kiss, tossing my head back as I make some sort of strange mewling noise and press myself against his hand. I’m practically vibrating with my need and Haymitch seems content on taking things as slow as he can get away with.

“Haymitch…” my voice is strained.

“Say it.” He tells me. I groan in frustration. “Say it, Katniss.”

Effie Trinket would probably faint at my next indecorous words, but Haymitch merely grins and rips my shirt off over my head, somehow unfastening my bra in almost the same moment, and then my breast is in his mouth and I am, once again, the girl on fire. This time when his fingers find their way between my legs, it’s not enough. I need more. I groan in frustration and Haymitch smirks at me before he flips us around so that I’m sitting on the couch and he’s now kneeling on the floor in front of me.

“Trust me.” He says, a glint in his blue eyes, that curtain of hair giving him a mischievous look that I don’t trust for a second, but he doesn’t give me time to voice my dissent before he’s pulling off my boots and dragging the rest of my clothing down my legs, leaving me completely nude on his sofa. For a moment I feel self-conscious as his eyes drink in the sight of me, but his gaze isn’t lecherous or depreciating. There’s something in his eyes I’ve never seen before and it makes me feel beautiful and sexy despite the scars and burns that riddle my flesh. Haymitch hooks his arms under my legs, dragging me down to the edge of the couch, then presses a kiss on my inner thigh as he parts my legs. His fingers feel almost as soft as satin as they ghost up the inside of my thighs as well, his thumbs spreading the wetness that has collected on my sex, and then he’s leaning in and kissing me between my legs.

I feel gooseflesh rise on the tops of my legs as his hair tickles my thighs, and I comb my fingers through his hair, finding it still relatively clean from his shower last night, and softer than I imagined it might be. The scrape of his beard between my legs actually adds to my arousal rather than detracts from it and I splay my legs further apart to invite more of his kisses. I jolt when his tongue sweeps between the folds of flesh, but then he’s licking and sucking that little of bundle of nerves and I forget everything I know.

I never imagined anything could feel as good as what Haymitch is doing to me now. Last night pales in comparison, and I can’t imagine it ever getting better than this…until I feel his fingers enter me. Suddenly Haymitch is in a vice grip in my hands as I grind myself against him mindlessly. It feels so good and I want to feel the explosions so bad that it doesn’t cross my mind that he can’t breathe until he’s trying to pull away from me.

I fight him, almost whining when he stops what he’s doing, but then realize I’m suffocating him so I quickly release him. He’s breathless but laughing as he pulls back and I have the decency to blush.

“Sorry.”
“Don’t be.” He says, taking a minute to calm his breathing before he moves back in. “Just try not to kill me.”

This time, I run my fingers through his hair, but stay mindful of the amount of pressure I’m exuding from my arms and legs. By the time he’s brought me to the edge of bliss, my legs are shaking, and I’m all but screaming his name, begging him not to stop until I’m over the edge. Haymitch stays with me until the end, locking his mouth on me, pulsing his fingers inside of me, and letting me grind myself furiously against his face until I sink back, twitching and sated.

When Haymitch pulls back, I see his face glistening with my wetness and he suddenly looks very beautiful to me. The fire light is playing off the blonde in his hair, turning it golden. He seems younger in this moment, though I can’t place why I think so. I quietly move from the couch, straddling his legs as I kiss him deeply. I can taste myself on his lips and tongue, sweet and tangy.

“Teach me how to love a man.” I ask of him. Beyond the basics of sex, I know nothing—especially not the kinds of things that Haymitch just did to me—but I want to know how to please men…how to please Haymitch and make him forget everything the way he makes me forget.

“Katniss…” His protest is a sigh and I feel his arms encircle me. “This is…too dangerous.”

“Why?” I ask, pulling back to search his face. After the Hunger Games, the war, the deaths, destruction and despair; after everything we’d been through, this is dangerous? He doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t need to. The look in his eyes tells me everything.

Haymitch Abernathy is falling in love with me.

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TBC
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Haymitch’s POV.

Katniss slides off of my lap with a stoic expression and I watch her tug on her clothes, wondering at the change in her demeanor. Does she know I’m right? That fooling around is a bad idea, dangerous for her if Peeta were to find out about it? She must know it would destroy him…and any shot they might have ever had at happiness. I may be a demoralized scoundrel, but she doesn’t have to be.

I get to my feet, knowing she’ll be leaving now that she’s gotten what she wants, and am completely taken off guard when she spins around and slaps me across the face. For a second, I’m too shocked to even react, but then the anger is the first thing to surface. “What the hell is your problem, sweetheart?”

“How long?” She demands. My mind is working as fast as it can to connect the dots and figure out what the hell she’s talking about, but she connects them for me. “How long have you been in love with me, Haymitch?”

I know it’ll piss her off even more, but I can’t stop myself from laughing. Sure enough, Katniss lunges for me, trying to shove me with all her might, but this time my reflexes are ready and I catch her wrists, holding her back as she struggles against me. “Don’t flatter yourself, sweetheart. I’m not the loving kind.”

This takes the fight out of her for a minute as she looks at me with confusion and disbelief. “Then what did you mean by that?”

I think back to what I’d said. “That this is dangerous?” I let her go and touch my chin, looking up to the right as I mock her. “Gee, let me see…what could possibly be dangerous about you and I fooling around? Oh, here’s one: Peeta. Did you stop to think about your little boyfriend before you started kissing me? Think about how he might react when he finds out about us? He’s not exactly the most stable person in the world right now, Katniss.”

Her eyes are narrowed into slits. She knows I’m right, yet she still wants to blame me. That’s fine; that’s nothing new. She’s been blaming me since the first day we met.

“If you’re so worried about what Peeta might think, why did you…” She doesn’t finish, and I see the fierce blush on her face.

“Why’d I what?” I take a step towards her, knowing I’m antagonizing her now. She stands her ground, but I can feel the waves of tension radiating off of her. I lean in and brush my lips over her ear. “Why did I eat your pussy? Is that what you want to know? Why did I kiss you? Finger you? I don’t recall hearing you complain, sweetheart.”

That does it. She snaps like a rubber band being stretched to the limit and knocks into me like a cannonball. We crash to the floor—she’s more solid than I thought—and she’s pinning me down with her forearm across my neck, her teeth bared, eyes blazing with rage. My mind flashes back to the day on the hovercraft when she tried to claw my eyes out, and I refuse to let this little twit of a girl best me again.
Wrapping my leg around hers, I lunge up at her with all my strength, flipping her under me and pinning her to my floor by her wrists. I stretch my body out along hers, my feet pinning her legs down by the ankle.

“Get off of me.” She hisses, struggling beneath me.

“Or what?” I’m enjoying rattling her cage a little too much, growing hard against her as I refuse to release her. I decide to use this against her as well, rolling my hips against hers.

“Let me go.” She tells me, but the fight is leaving her as the arousal begins to take over.

“Why?” I tease her, leaning down to brush my nose along the side of her neck. I hear her breath catch, her pulse quickens, and she’s moving against me slowly. “Seems like I’ve got you just where you want to be.”

I’ve let my guard down a second too long and Katniss takes advantage of the slack in my hold, rolling us back over so that’s straddling my hips, her fingers locked between mine as she tries to press my hands against the floor next to my head. I’m still physically stronger, and I pull her down until her lips are within reach. I lift my head and kiss her. She doesn’t resist. In fact, she’s kissing me as hungrily as she did that first time. As angry or pissed off or whatever she is at me, it’s no match against her arousal.

I still don’t think fooling around is a good idea, but what Peeta doesn’t know won’t kill me. I’ll worry about that when—if—he ever comes back here for Katniss.

This time I want more than to give Katniss what she wants…this time I want something in return. We’re kissing so hard that it hurts my lips, but somehow it still feels too good to be true. I’m yanking her clothes back off of her and she’s fumbling with the buttons on my shirt in return. So she wants it as bad as I do… I try not to grin, knowing that my smugness could bring back her self-righteous wrath and ruin the moment.

We vie for dominance, rolling around on the floor as we wrestle each other out of our clothes, until we’re finally both fully naked and pressed together with her beneath me. Katniss yields, stretching her body out and pressing as much of herself against me as she can. Her nails scratch up and down my back and I can almost hear her purring. This time I do grin, but only because her eyes are closed and she can’t see me.

“Is it safe to assume you’ve never done this before?” I ask, though I’m sure I know the answer.

Her eyes fly open and she looks at me with muted embarrassment. “Done what?”

“Sex, sweetheart.” I say plainly, wanting to make her blush again just because I know I can. “Have you had sexual intercourse with a man before?”

“Does it matter?” She looks away from me as that flush of red creeps along her cheekbones. “It does if you don’t want it to hurt.”

This catches her by surprise and she looks back at me as if this is the first she’s heard that it might be painful. Normally I would probably laugh at her, but she’s so naïve that I can’t bring myself to find humor in this moment. “Trust me.” I tell her, rather than explain.

She glares at me for a moment. “Stop telling me to trust you.”

“But you’re too gullible; I can’t resist.” I lean down and kiss her before she can start yelling again.

I slide my hand between her legs, playing with her until she’s good and wet. I’m so hard it hurts. I
can’t remember the last time I’ve had sex—other than with my own hand—and it takes every ounce of my control not to force my way inside of her. I press myself against her entrance. It’s warm and wet and I can feel the pulse of her arousal even here. A groan escapes me as I nearly lose it right there.

“What’s wrong?” Katniss says, tensing beneath me as she misconstrues the noise.

“Not a thing, sweetheart.” I tell her as I slowly start to work my way inside of her. My fingers work her clit to distract her and help relax her, and soon she’s trying to thrust herself up against me. I take advantage of each of these thrusts, letting myself slip a little further into her, muttering profanities as she slowly encases me within her warmth. I feel the resistance of her maidenhead and know this is the part that will hurt her the most. “Kiss me.” I tell her. When her lips meet mine, I thrust my tongue into her mouth and break through the resistance between her legs. She cries out, the sound muffled by our kiss, and I distract her with my fingers and tongue as I let the pain pass.

After a few short moments, Katniss is moving beneath me again and I know that the pleasure has returned full force. I pull back to the tip, then sheath myself inside of her again. Katniss rips away from my mouth, crying out in newfound pleasure, her knees drawing up even further and I know I don’t need to hold back anymore.

I lose myself in the bliss; the hot, wet, tight space that I’m the first person to ever enter. She’s moaning, crying, sighing beneath me. Her nails dig into my back as I take her. It’s been too long and this feels too good, and I know I’m not going to last for much longer, but I can feel her quivering, her inner walls starting to clench and contract around me and I know she’s close. I find her clit again, eager for her to experience this type of release with me, and I send her over the edge.

“Haymitch!” She cries, clinging to me as she writhes against me, a growl forming in her throat as she finds her orgasm. “Haymitch…Haymitch…oh…Haymitch…yes…yes!”

I realize I’m coming along with her, too wrapped up in the experience of her first real orgasm and the way she’s saying my name to be mindful enough to pull out of her. Oh well, I think, knowing it’s too late to worry about that now. As damaged as my body is from years of alcohol abuse, it would take a miracle for me to actually be able to do any damage this way.

Her name is on my tongue as I let the pleasure sweep over me, but I force myself not to say it. Things are already too mixed up between us; I don’t want to add to it by mindlessly murmuring sweet nothings in her ear. When the last wave of ecstasy dies out, our bodies melt together, too sapped to hold up any longer. Katniss drags my head down against her shoulder, holding me tightly, and I let her, knowing I don’t have the energy to resist.

“What was it…” her voice sounds small and unsure—very un-Katniss-like—and I wait for her to finish. “Good?”

I huff out an exhausted laugh. “Trust me, sweetheart…you have no idea.” My eyes feel heavy and all I want to do is sleep, but I know I’m probably crushing her beneath me, so I finally gather up my strength and roll off of her. I feel her sit up next to me, and hear her sharp intake of breath. My eyes fly open, muscles suddenly tense and ready to spring into action in case some unforeseen danger has just made its presence known, but Katniss is staring at her fingers, which are shaking and tipped with blood.

I immediately recognize it for what it is and grab my shirt, wiping off her hand. “It’s normal.” I tell her. “Most women bleed their first time.”
“I didn’t expect that.” She says flatly.

I stand up and offer her my hand. “Come on. Let’s clean up.”

Her eyes briefly glance down at me before they snap back up to my eyes and I grin at her. “It’s alright, sweetheart, take a good look.”

I waggle myself at her just to further embarrass her and she scoffs and pushes me aside. I laugh as I watch her storm away; the effect is lessened by her naked state, but I quickly follow her to my bedroom. She’s already running the shower, turning the faucet until steam rises, and climbs under the spray. I don’t ask her if I can join her, I just do. Katniss turns to face me and wraps her arms around my waist, pulling me under the showerhead. I squint against the scalding water and find her squinting up at me curiously. This time when I kiss her, it’s because I really can’t help myself.

“You really don’t love me?” She asks, her tone suggesting she still doesn’t believe me.

“Love is a liability.” I answer, moving her out from under the flow of lava and adjusting the temperature to something a little more humanly tolerable as I start to wash myself off. “The more you love someone, the more likely they are to get hurt. If you don’t love anyone, then no one can get hurt.”

She’s quiet as she takes in what I’ve just said and I know she’s considering the truth behind my words. I tip her chin up until her eyes meet mine, not wanting to be the one to crush whatever hope still lingers inside of her. I kiss her gently. “There’s no happy ending left for me…but you and Peeta still have a chance. Things are changing…maybe there’s still hope.”

“And if Peeta doesn’t want me anymore?”

I think of the right thing to say, but what is there? I shrug and give her my most obnoxious smile possible. “Then I guess we don’t have to worry about fooling around behind his back, do we?”

Katniss rolls her eyes but can’t contain her rueful smile. “Just when I think you might actually have a heart, you go and prove how much of a jackass you really are.”

“I’d hate to give myself a bad reputation.”

She’s laughing again, pushing me out of the water so that she can wash herself off, and I find myself trying to remember the last time I made anyone laugh because I’d meant to. As we playfully fight each other for the water, it dawns on me that this situation is as dangerous for me as it is for Katniss. The more time I spend with her, the more I find I like being around her. I’ve spent too many years shutting myself away from people for me to give in now, but she’s like a drug I can’t give up and I know I became addicted long before we returned to District 12 together.

Suddenly, I find myself hoping Peeta comes back sooner rather than later to take Katniss off my hands. The longer we’re together, the harder it’s going to be for me to go back to living alone.

When Katniss leaves, the house feels heavy with her absence and I trudge into the kitchen out of habit, reaching for my long-time friend. I break the seal on the cap, and take several large swallows before I realize that I don’t really feel like drinking. I stare at the bottle in my hand, baffled by this.

“Huh…” I say to the empty air around me as I recap the bottle and set it down on the table thoughtfully. There has never been a single minute in the past 25 years that I have not wanted a drink. I briefly consider that I might be ill—maybe my liver has finally given up on me and gone on to commit suicide. It would serve me right, really, after the way I’ve tried to pickle myself. I remember the hell I went through when the people of District 13 had tried to dry me up. Weeks
and weeks without so much as a drop of anything remotely similar to alcohol. I thought it was going to kill me. This feels different though. This time, I don’t need to drink.

I leave the kitchen as quick as I can before I consider the implications of my self-imposed sobriety, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that it’s because of Katniss. Not for her, but because of how I feel when I’m with her. I guess I wasn’t far from the mark when I considered that she was like a drug to me. I never realized she’d be a stronger vice than the drink. Yep…this is going to be really dangerous.

I wake up as the sun bleeds in through the curtains, disoriented at first. I never sleep at night, but somehow I had no problem with that last night. If I dreamed, for once I don’t remember, and for that I do thank Katniss. Now that I’m awake and it’s daylight outside and I still don’t need a drink, I have no idea what to do with myself.

Since I’m already damned anyway I look at it, I get up, get dressed and make my way over to Katniss’.

She answers the door bleary-eyed, hair mussed from sleep, but she looks nowhere near as rested as I feel. “Haymitch? What time is it?”

“Early.” I say, looking at the barely-risen sun. “When did you go to sleep?”


“You could stay with me.” The words are out before I realize I’ve even said them, but it’s too late to take them back.

“Really?” Her voice is hopeful, but careful.

“Yeah, sure. I mean…at least until Peeta comes back.” I add the last part because I know I should.

“Until Peeta comes back.” She agrees with a nod, though the words are hollow. She still doesn’t believe he’ll ever return. Part of me is still hoping he won’t, but nothing truly good ever holds out in my life, so I know it’s just a matter of time. Make the most of it. I tell myself.

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TBC
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Katniss’ POV.

Maybe it’s knowing that there are no expectations from Haymitch, or maybe it’s my own desperation, but being with him is easy. I don’t have to talk unless I want to, and any time I need to forget, he’s right there to wipe away the memories.

It doesn’t take me long to realize he’s not drinking anymore, but I don’t ask him about it. One thing is for certain, though. Whether drunk or sober, Haymitch can’t cook to save his life. “How have you survived this long on just alcohol?” I ask as I try to make a meal out of whatever meager ingredients he has stored in the cabinets. It’s definitely not much, and I make a mental note to have Greasy Sae come here to make whatever meals she’s supposed to cook for me so that Haymitch eats, too.

Eat, sleep, sex. It becomes almost like a routine after a few days, but Haymitch is teaching me so much about giving and receiving pleasure that there’s nothing else I want to do. I can’t help but wonder, since he’s been so alone for so long, where he learned everything he knows. He’s already told me once before that the Capital didn’t whore him out the way it did with Finnick; and I can’t imagine that with as crass and drunk as he always is he would have too many willing callers. Had he and Mica done these things together? I want to ask him, but talking about Mica with him is like his bringing up Prim with me. I know it’ll shut him down and I don’t want do that to him…but superficial conversation is starting to wear thin.

As we lay together, sated from our latest exploit, I decide to phrase the question in a way that doesn’t directly bring up Mica. “Haymitch…where did you learn all of this?”

“All of what?” His voice is tired and I can tell he’s already on the verge of sleep.

“Everything you’ve done with me.”

He takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. “Finnick’s wasn’t the only sex slave in the Capital, sweetheart. Not hard to find some you could pay for a good time.”

“You paid for sex?” I know I shouldn’t be surprised, but the only time Haymitch ever went to the Capital was during the games. I feel horrified by the thought that he was wasted on alcohol and sated by sex while my predecessors in the Games were being slaughtered.

“I wasn’t exactly going to get it any other way.” The gruff tone tells me he’s starting to get annoyed, but I’m still too quick to anger…too quick to judge everyone else around me.

“So rather than get sponsors for your Tributes, you just decided to spend your time eating, drinking, and fucking. No wonder they all died.”

I know I’ve gone too far, even before Haymitch throws me off of him. I bounce across the bed, landing on the far edge. Haymitch is up, grabbing his robe, and is nearly out the door before I can blink. I jump as he slams the door so hard the walls shake. I sit there for a long time, knowing I should go and apologize to him, but I can’t find my nerve. I hear the shattering of glass downstairs.
and pull myself out of the bed, grabbing his shirt and haphazardly buttoning it up as I run to the kitchen.

Haymitch is slumped on the floor, back against the wall, the heels of his hands pressed against his eyes. I can see the twist of his mouth and I know at once that he’s crying. I stand in the doorway, frozen, gaping at him. An apology seems completely inadequate now, but I have to do something. I see the mess of broken glass and amber liquid and know that he’s broken a near-full bottle of alcohol. I swallow the lump in my throat and slowly move towards him.

“Just leave me alone.” He tells me in a rough, but broken voice.

“No.” I say, my own shaking slightly.

“Do you know what it was like?” He says suddenly, dropping his hands away and looking me with angry, red eyes. “Can that tiny little brain of yours imagine how it felt to watch those kids die year after year? To know that nothing you could ever do would save them? To know that no matter how hard you try, no one would ever sponsor a kid from District 12?”

I sit down on my knees in front of him, but I don’t answer him. I don’t need to.

“You were the only one I could get sponsors for, Katniss. The only one.” He drops his head in his hands again. “Do you have any idea what it was like, coming home—alone—after the Games, facing their families? They blamed me just like you do. It’s as if I’m personally responsible for each of their deaths. I don’t know…maybe I am…maybe I should have done like you said and told them just to kill themselves as quickly as possible.”

“Stop it.” I tell him, unable to cope with the guilt he’s carried for so many years. I understand now why the alcohol was never enough, why he would have sought out something else to ease the pain. A tear cuts a fresh path down his cheek and I lunge at him, wrapping my arms tightly around him. “Stop it.”

Haymitch clutches me against him, burying his face against my shoulder as he breaks down the same way I did with him that day on the steps of the Justice Building. All I can do is hold him, stroke his hair and rub his back, as he lets it all out. I’m so under qualified to deal with Haymitch’s break down, but I know I’m all he’s got. Has anyone ever been there for him? The thought nearly kills me and I hold him tighter.

I don’t know how long it takes before Haymitch cries himself out, but when he finally does I can feel how bone-weary tired he is. He’s leaning so heavily against me that I’m practically all that’s holding him up. I have no idea how I manage to get him to his feet, but I take him to the living room and deposit him on the couch, knowing I can’t support him all the way up to the bedroom. I throw a few pieces of wood into the fireplace and light a low fire, then I find a blanket, drape it over Haymitch and sit with his head in my lap. He stares blankly at the fire as I stroke his hair and I finally find my apology.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper.

His eyes close for a moment before they slowly open again. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” I swallow the lump of guilt. “I’m a bad judge of character. I always jump to the wrong conclusions…mostly about you.”

“It’s nothing new, Katniss.”

The resignation in his voice hurts me more than his sarcasm would have and I feel tears sting my own eyes. “I’m sorry.” I tell him again, not knowing what else to say.
His hand finds one of mine and squeezes it gently. “It’s okay.”

I lace my fingers through his, holding to him tightly as I continue to stroke his hair. Eventually Haymitch drifts off, and I watch him sleep. The slight crease in his brow tells me he’s dreaming, and I can only imagine what horrors I’ve dredged up for him. I let myself cry for Haymitch while he sleeps, pitying everything he’s had to endure alone. I remember what I’d said to him before the Quarter Quell, about how life would be miserable for him whether he was in the arena or not. There had been pain in his eyes, but he’d responded with his usual sarcasm. If his life had been so wretchedly depressing, how had he not just ended it? I wonder if maybe he had tried to kill himself, but—like my own attempts—he hadn’t been able to succeed because someone always stepped in. The Capital maybe? Finnick was their whore, why couldn’t Haymitch be something like that.

*I was the example.* I hear his voice in my head. Haymitch had defied the Capital in the same way Peeta and I had with the nightlock. He had used the Games to his advantage, and they had made him pay. Through the death of his family, Mica, and his continued involvement as mentor to the other tributes. Haymitch’s punishment was life.

As sleep starts to take over me, I find myself wondering if they did something to Haymitch to make him incapable of dying. My dreams are filled with images of the people I love, all on the verge of death, but unable to succumb to it. I’m forced to watch them suffer as they beg me to end their pain. Prim, Peeta, Gail, my mother. They’re all there. Finnick, Cinna…Haymitch.

I awake with a start to find that the sun has come up and I’m alone on the couch.

“How? Haymitch?” I sit up and look around.

“Kitchen.” He slurs. I sigh, realizing he’s getting himself good and drunk again. I pad into the kitchen, not caring that I’m still dressed only in his shirt, and sit across from him, pulling my feet up on the edge of the chair and wrapping my arms around my legs.

“I thought you stopped drinking.”

“I did.” He nods. “Now I’m starting drinking.”

“Why?”


“Peeta paints because it was his talent.”

“No, sweetheart; Peeta painted to try and cope.”

I watch him take another swig, swiping his mouth with the back of his hand as a few drops escape his lips. “Is this because of me? Because of what I said last night?”

He slams the bottle down on the table. “I’ve got a newsflash for you: Not everything is about you! In case you haven’t noticed, the world doesn’t revolve around you—never has. Who gives a shit if you were the Mockingjay. If it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else. Sorry to disappoint you, sweetheart, but you’re not as special as you think you are.”

My eyes are stinging with tears. I know he’s drunk and angry and will probably apologize later, but right now it hurts because I know he’s lying. At least about the part where he’s not drinking because of me. “Keep telling yourself that, Haymitch. Maybe one day you’ll really believe it.”
I don’t wait for him to say anything else as I get up and go change into my own clothes. I gather up what few things I brought here, and walk out the front door, slamming it behind me the same way he did last night.

“Stupid, arrogant, pigheaded, selfish bastard.” I grumble as I cross to my house.

“I’ve been called worse.”

The voice stops me dead in my tracks, my heart leaping into my throat. I whirl around and see Peeta a few feet behind me. Where had he come from? For a minute, I don’t know whether or not I should hug him. The last I’d seen him, he was still working through figuring out which memories were real and which ones weren’t, and whether or not he wanted to kill me.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, rocking up on the balls of his feet, then back on his heels. “Sorry…kidding.”

I blink, still not believing he’s really here, and simply stare at him.

“They deemed me fit for society.” He tells me, reading my mind. “Guess they don’t think I’m a danger anymore.”

“Are you?” I can’t help but ask.

He thinks about this for a minute. “I don’t want to kill you right now. That’s something, right?”

I sigh and move to hug Peeta the way I’ve wanted to since getting him back from Snow, like I would have the day he decided to choke the life out of me. “I missed you so much, Peeta.”

“Me too…I think.”

I laugh, knowing he’s joking and he pulls back. “So I take it you were talking about Haymitch a minute ago?”

I can’t help the noise of disgust that escapes me at the sound of Haymitch’s name.

“So, nothing’s changed there.”

I can’t tell Peeta just how much had changed, about the solace Haymitch and I had found in each other. Guilt begins to bubble in my chest as I face the fact that I single-handedly destroyed anything that might have existed between me and Haymitch. I’m a terrible person. “No…” I lie, looking past him to Haymitch’s house. “Nothing’s changed.”

It takes a few days for me to trust Peeta again enough to be close to him the way we were before the rebellion. We sort through the remaining distorted memories he has, playing his Real/Not Real game for hours a day. I take him through the town, where people are still working to clear rubble and gather the remains of those who perished. Peeta stands for a long while in the scorched wreckage of his father’s bakery as he comes to terms with everything he has lost. After a while, I move in beside him and take his hand in mine to show him that he still has me.

Haymitch hasn’t surfaced since I left his house, and I assume that he’s still trying to get to the bottom of every bottle he owns. We’ll see him when he runs out of alcohol and needs more. I feel guilty for abandoning Haymitch, but that was the agreement wasn’t it? Just until Peeta comes back? Besides, if he’s so put off by me, then I doubt he even misses me. I try to tell myself that I don’t miss him either.

Real or not real. I think to myself one night as I lay in Peeta’s arms. You love Haymitch.
I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to even think about the answer to that question and curl up tighter against Peeta, as I force myself to fall asleep.

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TBC
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Haymitch's POV.

The incessant knocking rouses me from a very deep, dreamless sleep. I lift my head, trying to figure out where the hell it’s coming from before remembering I don’t care.

“Go away!” I yell, dropping my head back onto the table.

The knocking continues, louder, and I realize it’s coming from the front door. Katniss has never had the decency to knock—much preferring the method of dumping a bucket of water on my head to wake me up—and I’m not expecting anyone else for the rest of my life, so I’m clueless to think who the hell is so insistent upon seeing me.

I stagger up from my chair, nearly tilting sideways into the wall before I can get my feet under me and make my way to the door. I pull it open just enough to press my face in the crack, squinting against the harsh light of day that momentarily blinds me before I can make out who’s standing on my doorstep.

“Well.” Effie Trinket’s voice is full of indignation. “Glad to see you’re still alive after all.”

“What do you want?” I grumble at her, now able to pick out the pink hair and matching dress against her pale skin.

“Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

“I wasn’t.” I tell her, but hold the door open for her anyways. I can tell when the stench of alcohol and my unwashed body hits her nose, because she tries to politely recoil, but can’t help covering her nose.

“Oh, good heavens, Haymitch…” It takes her a minute to compose herself. “I’ve changed my mind, we’ll meet at Katniss’ home in one hour. You will be bathed and sober when you get there.”

It’s not a request.

“Why?” I ask as she starts to walk away.

“Pardon?” She turns.

“Why would I agree to meet you in an hour at Katniss’ house?”

“If you would ever answer your phone, you would know, Haymitch. Now clean up and get over to Katniss’ quick, quick, quick.”

I want to tell Effie to piss off, off, off, but I just scowl and slam the door as she walks away. Effie may be irritating, but she’s harmless, and a harsh word with her cuts straight to the bone. She’s not my friend by any stretch of the imagination, but I do care about her. Which is why, an hour later, I’m clean and as sober as I’m going to be today, and standing on Katniss’ doorstep.
Katniss and I haven’t spoken since the morning she stormed out of my house. I fully expected her to come back to me, either later that night or the next morning when she needed her next round of therapy, but she never did. I later learned that Peeta had come back that very same morning, and I realized that our arrangement was over. We’d both agreed to the terms, now we had to stick to them.

Fine. Mazel Tov. Have a nice life, sweetheart. I told myself that Katniss only complicated matters—the only thing she and I had in common was our enjoyment of sex—but now I was quitting my drug cold turkey. The alcohol helped to numb me about as much as it always had—which was never enough—but at least I could always get drunk to pass out. I just could never get drunk enough to get her off my mind. Now when I dreamed, I dreamed of Katniss Everdeen. As if my life wasn’t miserable enough.

Peeta’s the one who answers the door, and for a moment his eyes narrow at me. I’m not sure if it’s the mixed memories or if perhaps Katniss has confessed our crimes to him, but it quickly passes and he holds his hand out to me. “Haymitch…it’s good to see you.”

“What’s this about?”

“Peeta.” I reply neutrally as I shake his hand. “What’s this about?”

“Come in, I’ll let Effie give you the details.” I follow him into the living room, where Katniss is seated in the middle of the couch. Barely concealed rage is radiating off of her in waves. Ah…this I know how to deal with. I sit down directly next to her, sprawling myself out and making sure that our bodies are touching.

“Miss Everdeen.” I greet in a saccharine voice.

“Haymitch.” She says coldly, without looking at me.

“So, tell me what I’m doing here, sweetheart.” I’m talking to Effie, but still looking at Katniss. Peeta seems to be either indifferent to me leaning into Katniss, or completely oblivious.

“Plutarch wants to go on with the wedding.” Effie tells me.

This grabs my attention and I look at her. “What wedding?”

“Our wedding.” Peeta tells me. “Katniss and mine.”

“Why?” I ask, not seeing the motive behind it. “The Capital’s back in the hands of the people, Snow’s dead—as is Coin—and, if I remember it right, Katniss isn’t exactly winning any popularity contests.”

“Peeta and Katniss gave people something to hope for, something to dream about.” Effie tells me. “We need that more than ever, especially in Capital where people have lived such sheltered lives. There’s a sort of mass shell shock affecting the Capital residents and Plutarch thinks this will help them cope. Besides, everyone wants to see the star-crossed lovers of District 12 finally get their happy ending.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Katniss looks at me then, smugly. “Guess who gets to give me away.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then you’ll be forever known as the man who broke Katniss Everdeen’s heart. Katniss Everdeen—the Girl on Fire, the Mockingjay, the girl who wanted nothing more than to marry the love of her life, Peeta Mellark, and be given away by her dear mentor, Haymitch. You wouldn’t want
that, would you, Haymitch?”

Well if she’s not the little snake in the grass.

“Of course not, sweetheart.” I put my arm around her shoulder and kiss her forehead. “I’ll gladly give you away.”

“Splendid!” Effie claps her hands, completely missing the entire exchange between Katniss and me.

“When do we leave?” I ask, wanting to get back home and into the loving arms of another bottle.

“When do you think?” Effie laughs.

“What? Now?”

“Come on, Haymitch.” Katniss says, mimicking Effie. “It’s going to be a big, big, big day! You don’t want to hold up the wedding of all weddings, do you?”

“I guess I was wrong about you, sweetheart.” I narrow my eyes. “I guess the world really does revolve around you. Well, if you’ll pardon me, Princess, I’ll just go pack.”

Within the hour, I’m back on the familiar Capital train that has transported me to and from the Games for the last 25 years. I stow my bag in the same cabin I’ve always used, then head straight for the bar car. Effie is in the dining car, taking advantage of the many sweets banqueted in the room.

“Haymitch, dear…” she calls as I pass her. I pause with a sigh and turn to look at her.

“That once…for me?”

I realize she’s asking me not to drink. “What’s in it for me?”

Effie thinks for a minute then looks at me seriously. “I’ll never ask you for anything else, ever.”

That offer sounds too good to be true, but Effie’s not one to go back on her word. “Swear it.”

“You know I do, Haymitch.” She says softly.

“Fine.” I fall into one of the chairs in the car. “But I hope you know what you’re asking for. You didn’t see me the last time I was sober.”

“No.” She says quietly, picking at a sweet roll. “I was being held prisoner at the time.”

Neither of us says anything for a long moment, knowing there’s nothing we can say to ever change what happened. If the rebels hadn’t found and freed Effie when they did, she’d have been killed with the others, and I would have had one more death on my conscience.

“I’ll try to mind my manners.” I tell her as honestly as possible.

Her demeanor changes at this and she smiles brightly. “Well, that will be a nice change.”

I’m able to avoid Katniss for most of the duration of the trip, too sick from withdrawal to eat anything, and keeping to myself in my cabin as I use the time to dry up and sort myself out. I don’t want to think about the wedding mostly because it’s just as absurd as it always was—a publicity stunt, nothing more—but partly because my head starts spinning anytime I think about Katniss.

When we arrive at the Capital, we’re taken to the training center, and I feel a vague sense of déjà
vu as we ride the elevator up to the 12th floor. “Am I the only one who has a bad feeling about this?”

Three pairs of eyes stare at me, but no one answers, and it doesn’t help me shake the feeling that something seems off about this whole ordeal.

Dinner is set on the table and two Avox girls stand by to wait on us hand-and-foot—though they are supposedly being paid now, and offered the choice of servitude. I pass, again, on eating and go to my room, stripping down to nothing and climb under the sheets, wanting nothing more than to sleep until I have to perform my duty, then go back home and drink the life out of myself.

It’s dark outside when the bed shifts and a warm body slips in next to me. Katniss’ lips are on mine before I can even pull my eyelids open. I jerk back, angry and confused by her hot-and-cold feelings for me. “What are you doing in here?”

“Peeta’s asleep.” She tells me, trying to climb on top of me.

“No.” She still fights to straddle me, and I push her down on the bed by her shoulders. “Katniss, no.”

“Please, Haymitch…I need you.”

“You need your head examined.” I sit up, putting my back to her. “Go back to Peeta.”

“Fine.” Her voice shakes ever so slightly and I feel the bed shift again as she gets up. I listen to her hastily dress, then hear her barefeet cross to the door. “By the way, Haymitch…I just thought you might like to know that I’m pregnant.”

I look back at her, not breathing, and find her looking at me with an unreadable expression.

“And it’s not Peeta’s.”

She opens the door and I know only have half a second before she’ll be gone forever. My throat feels as dry as a dessert as I try to call her back. “Kat—Katniss.”

She pauses in the doorway but doesn’t look at me. I find my pants and tug them on as I move towards her, pushing the door closed and blocking her exit. She doesn’t look at me.

“How long?”

“I don’t know.” She says shakily. “With everything else, I wasn’t keeping track of my cycle, but I realized I was late about a week ago.”

“You’re sure you’re pregnant?”

“Not 100%, but I’ve never missed my period, even by a few days.” She gives a short, hysteric laugh. “Tick tock, I’m a clock.”

She hiccups a sob, covering her mouth and I can see the impending breakdown. I pull her into my arms and hold her as tightly as I can. “And you’re sure it can’t be his?”

She’s shaking her head. “He’s not ready for that yet. We sleep in the same bed, but the farthest we’ve gotten is kissing. He’s still too messed up for anything else. He said love and hate are both strong emotions and he can’t sort them out yet. He’s scared he’ll get confused and hurt me.”

Katniss breaks down, sobbing into my chest. “What am I going to do?”
I feel myself returning to mentor-mode, not mentally prepared to defuse this bomb she’s dropped on me. We need time to work out a plan, but time is not something that is on our side. In a few days, I’ll be walking Katniss down the aisle, signing away any privileges and rights she has given me to her body, knowingly giving her away while she carries my child. This situation couldn’t be more fucked up if I tried.

“You’re going to pull yourself together, you’re going to go back to that boy and pretend to be madly in love with him—unless you don’t need to pretend—and you’re not going to tell anyone about the baby. I’ll think of something.”

I have to give the girl credit; she wipes the wetness from her eyes and tries to calm her breathing as she looks at me, seeming to draw strength from my words. “Thank you, Haymitch.”

“I need to know…do you want to keep the baby?” I’m not sure if I want her to say yes or no, and again I’m holding my breath as I wait for her to answer.

“Yes.” She says so softly that I have to strain to hear her. Her fingers catch my face as she gently pulls me down into a tender kiss that stirs something long dead inside of me. When she slips from the room, I realize I was wrong about this situation. It’s now as bad as it could possibly be.

In a few days, Peeta Mellark will marry the girl I love.

TBC
Chapter 5

Katniss’ POV.

At breakfast that next morning, Haymitch looks worse than I’ve ever seen him. It’s obvious he didn’t go back to sleep after I left his room, and everyone else seems content to think that this is just Haymitch sobering up, but I know him better than that. I try to make eye contact with him several times during breakfast, but he refuses to look at me and says nothing as Effie goes on and on about the wedding plans.

They plan to use one of Cinna’s dresses—one of the few that weren’t destroyed on Snow’s order—and want us to be married in front of the President’s mansion. Plutarch wants as much symbolism as possible to make an impact on everyone in Panem.

I tune Effie out when she starts talking about how each District is going to be represented in the wedding and look across the table at Peeta. His mind seems to be otherwise occupied as well, and I wonder if he’s marrying me because he feels he has to, or because he really loves me. Effie continues to chatter on, oblivious to the fact that none of us is listening to her, and I can’t take it anymore. I feel like I’m going to explode if I sit there any longer.

“I need some air.” I blurt out, cutting Effie off and throwing my napkin down on my untouched plate of food.

“Must be pre-wedding jitters,” I hear her tell the others before I’m out of earshot and heading up to the roof. The sun is warm on my skin and I suck in a lungful of air as I try to quell the urge to vomit. Everything is happening too fast—Peeta coming back home, me finding out I’m pregnant, Effie calling about Plutarch wanting to go ahead with the wedding. Peeta and I had talked about it—at length—and tried to figure out if we should go through with it.

“Real or not real,” he had asked me, “You love me.”

“Real.” I had told him.

It was true, I suppose. I did love Peeta, but did I want to marry him? The first thought in my head was a resounding: No. I didn’t want to marry anyone. Not yet, at least. Not with everything still so…dark. At least helping Peeta battle his demons has kept my own at bay, but I’m not ready for this. Any of this.

Haymitch appears next to me, leaning against the half-wall railing us back from the ledge. “You don’t have to do this, Katniss.”

I laugh dryly. “Marry Peeta or have your baby?”

“Either…both.” He shrugs. “If I’d known there was even the slightest chance that I could have knocked you up, I would never have

“I know.” I cut him off, not wanting to hear him tell me that everything had been a mistake. We fall silent for a minute and I can tell Haymitch wants to say something, but is restraining himself.
He seems to make some sort of internal decision and lets out the breath he’d been holding.

“If you want to go through with it—marry Peeta, have the baby—then I have an idea.”

I practically go deaf trying to listen to what he’s about to tell me.

“Tell Peeta that you want to have a baby.” He says slowly, obviously trying to find any flaws in his plan as he relays it to me. “But tell him that you’re afraid of what the hijacking might have done to him—that you’re worried it might affect any offspring you might have with him for the next few years. Then tell him that you think the two of you should ask me to be the surrogate father; that it’s the least I could do after everything else I’ve failed you at.”

“You haven’t failed us, Haymitch.”

When he looks at me, his eyes are deep grey pools of hopelessness. “Haven’t I

When I say nothing, he looks away.

“You deserve to be happy, Katniss.”

“So do you.” I reach over and take Haymitch’s hand, and see the pain on his face. He pulls his hand away from mine.

“Don’t kid yourself, sweetheart.” That caustic tone is back, but his voice sounds strained. “I gave up any chance I had at happiness the day I became a victor.”

He turns to leave, and I find I don’t want him to go. “Haymitch…”

He waits, looking at me expectantly. I open my mouth to say something, anything, but the words that tumble out are not what either of us expects.

“I love you.”

I can see his face fall at my admission, but he closes the space between us, taking me into his arms as he kisses me fiercely. I cling to him desperately—afraid of what happens now that the words are out there. The choice is down to Peeta and Haymitch and I can’t lose either, but I know I can’t have both.

“Don’t.” Haymitch’s voice is still strained when he breaks the kiss. “Do yourself a favor, sweetheart, and don’t love me.”

“It’s too late.” I tell him, refusing to let him go, literally and figuratively.

“Katniss…” his voice breaks slightly and he presses his forehead to mine.

“Tell me you don’t feel the same,” I challenge him. “And I’ll walk away and marry Peeta.”

“Don’t do this to me.” He growls.

“It’s up to you, Haymitch.”

He breaks away from me, gripping the half-wall with his fingernails. I can see his entire body trembling under the extreme tension in his muscles. His face is obscured by his hair, but I see a teardrop splatter on the concrete between his hands. “I. Don’t. Love. You.”

Each word is spoken clearly, with great effort, but I know it’s a lie and all it does is anger me. “Liar.” I shove his arm, but he catches himself and barely budges. “Liar!”
Without looking at me, Haymitch speaks through clenched teeth. “I’ve made my choice, sweetheart.”

I’m crying hysterically, pounding my fists against him, screaming profanities at him, begging him to take it back, but Haymitch doesn’t move, not even to deflect my attacks. I can’t understand why he would deny how he feels about me, especially knowing I would stop the wedding if he would just tell me to, but he doesn’t. He expects me to marry Peeta. When he finally turns and wordlessly leaves, I collapse on the ground. I feel dazed—like I must have given myself another concussion somehow. My heart is racing again and I can’t catch my breath, but this time Haymitch isn’t there to catch me as I pass out.

Someone is stroking my hair when I come to. I feel warm and exhausted, my head aching. When I open my eyes, I find Peeta stretched out beside me on our shared bed. He smiles gently down at me.

“Welcome back.”

“What happened?” I ask, though I know full well what happened.

“When you left breakfast this morning, Effie and I figured Haymitch might be able to talk to you better than either of us could. I guess we were wrong. He said all you two did was fight—as usual—and that you tried to pummel him into a pulp before he finally decided to leave you alone.”

“Sounds about right.” I say flatly.

Peeta takes my hand in his and holds it gently. “Katniss, if you don’t want to marry me…I’ll understand. We could even wait a while…until things are better.”

I want to tell him everything—about Haymitch, about the baby—but I know I can’t. Haymitch made his choice to be without me, and I have no choice now but to be with Peeta. I can’t help the tears of sadness that start to fall, so I try to use them instead to convince Peeta of Haymitch’s plan.

“It isn’t that…” I sniffle.

“Then what?” He asks with sincere concern

I’ve never been a good actress, but I hope the tears are helping to cover that up. “When you told everyone I was pregnant…I really wanted it to be true. I want a baby with you, Peeta, but…” I pause for effect, trying to look torn.

“But what?” He’s buying into it.

“I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“What if the hijacking has…done something to you? What if affects our baby

“Oh…” He’s quiet for a minute and I pull him down to me in an attempt to show him how much I care for him and how sad this makes me. “I didn’t even think about that…What do you think we should do?”

“I don’t know.” I take a deep breath, pretending to think about it for a minute, and concoct the next part of my lie. “When I was in 13, they were telling us about the pox epidemic and how some families decided to use surrogates to conceive children. What if we found a surrogate who would
be willing to do that for us?”

“That’s asking a lot of someone, Katniss. Where would we even find someone who would be willing to do that; who would want nothing to do with the baby once it was born?”

I pause again, pretending to pick through a list of possibilities before I offer up the only name there is. “Haymitch.”

“Haymitch?” Peeta’s face registers shock, and even a little revulsion.

“He owes us, Peeta. For everything. And, he’s the last person who would want anything to do with me or a baby.”

Peeta considers this for a long time. “Do you think he would do it?”

“If he’s drunk enough, I think he would do anything.”

“True.” Peeta agrees, then looks at me carefully. “Is that what you want, Katniss? I mean…you hate Haymitch. Would you be able to love his kid?”

“It would be our child, Peeta. Not his. It doesn’t matter if he’s the one to do it, you’ll always be the father.”

“If this is what you want, Katniss, then how can I say no?”

I start crying harder, but it’s not tears of joy that I’m pretending them to be. I feel utterly hollowed out inside. I may love Peeta, but it’s Haymitch I want to be with. Drunken, crass, sarcastic Haymitch, who knows exactly what I’ve been through, who can be funny and witty when he wants to be, who is so beautiful when he’s smiling, who loves me…and still let me go.

Peeta kisses me, trying to dry my tears even though they keep falling. “When do you want to…do it?” He says, somewhat uncomfortably.

I manage to pull myself together and act happy, but nervous. “As soon as possible, I think. The thought of being with Haymitch is—“

“Unbearable?” He grins.

I try to laugh, but I know it sounds forced. “Something like that. I don’t want to lose my nerve.”

“Alright.” Peeta smiles and brings my hand up to his lips. “You get some rest, and…I’ll go ask Haymitch how he feels about being a surrogate.”

I’m eternally grateful that Peeta’s willing to take on this task without me. I’m not sure I want to face Haymitch right now. When Peeta talks to him, Haymitch will know that there’s no going back.

My stomach feels like it’s in knots. I curl up as Peeta leaves and will myself to fall asleep. This time, when I dream, I dream of the future. Of a small, blonde haired girl with grey eyes, running through a thicket of wildflowers as she chases a butterfly.

“Don’t go too far, Prim!” The voice beside me booms, and I look up to see Haymitch standing beside me, his fingers laced with mine as we watch our daughter play. I’m so happy that when I wake up again, I burst into tears, knowing my dream will never come true.
TBC
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Haymitch's POV.

I stare at the bottle of wine on the table, hoping for a contact high and glaring at Effie as she pours herself another glass. Insufferable woman. If she’s imposing this embargo on me, the least she could do is not drink in my presence…especially since I have more reason than ever to drink right now.

“How is Katniss feeling?” Effie asks as she slips a bite of meat into her mouth, looking curiously at Peeta.

“How is Katniss feeling?” Effie asks as she slips a bite of meat into her mouth, looking curiously at Peeta. “Tired. A little emotional, I guess.”

Peeta’s eyes flick to me for a minute. I know it’s my fault she passed out on the roof after I left her there, but it’s not like I did it intentionally. Well, at least I didn’t mean to make her faint…or leave her there unconscious. I didn’t even know about it until Peeta went up to check on her and carried her back inside.

I tip my chin up in defiance against his silent accusation. I did what I had to do, I did what was best for Katniss. I’m no good for her. Peeta will recover some day and be able to love and care for her the way she needs. What can I give her? A good time in the sack? That’s not enough to sustain a relationship. Besides, I’m more damaged than Peeta is in a lot of ways. She doesn’t need that on top of everything else that’s happened to her.

“Weddings certainly can be stressful.” Effie says, as if that explains everything.

“And you would know, right?” My tone is bitter, but I can’t help myself. “How many times have you been married, Effie? Once? Twice? Oh, that’s right…none.”

Effie tries to conceal her hurt and indignation behind her wine glass. “Simply because I’m not married doesn’t mean I can’t understand what Katniss is going through. I’m a planner. Stress is in my job description.”

“Sweetheart, you wouldn’t know stress if it jumped up and bit you on your pretty little ass.”

Effie straightens her posture. “There’s no reason to speak to me like that, Haymitch. I’m a lady, I won’t have you saying such vulgarities at the table.”

“So you won’t let me drink, you won’t let me cuss…can I breathe, or do I need permission for that now, too?”

I realize my voice has risen a notch and borders on the threshold of hostile when Effie sets her glass down and blinks back tears. “I understand you’re trying to sober up, Haymitch, but I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t take it out on the rest of us.”

With that she stands and hurries from the room, muffling her sobs as she goes.
I drop my head back with a long suffering sigh. I’ll have to apologize to her…again…and listen to her lecture on manners and feelings…again. How many times has she and I done this song and dance over the years? Peeta remains sitting there quietly, but he’s looking mildly amused.

“This might not be the best time, but I’ve a favor to ask you. Well…a proposition I guess.”

“Go on.”

“What would you say if I wanted to broker a deal in which any debt you feel you owe me or Katniss is paid in full?”

So she’s pulled him into my plan. I steeple my fingers under my chin and try to look intrigued. “I’m listening.”

Peeta feeds me the same lines I fed to Katniss, practically verbatim. He’s so convinced by it that I make a note to congratulate Katniss on finally being able to convince someone with her acting skills. I pretend to mull over the plan for a long minute. “So that’s it? I do this and I’m off the hook?”

“We’ll never ask you for anything else.”

“And she agreed to this?”

“It was her idea.”

She wishes. I pause for more effect then hold my hand out. “Deal.”

Peeta looks relieved but anxious. “I know this is probably too soon, but she really wants to do it as soon as possible, so I was thinking…maybe…before the wedding? That way, when we get back to 12, you don’t have to see us again unless you want to.”

“Think you can convince Effie to let me have a few drinks?” I’m sure even Peeta would question it if I told him I would do this sober.

“I’ll try. I won’t tell her why, though.”

“Good idea.” I take a deep breath. “Let me talk to her first. You know how she gets when someone’s hurt her feelings.”

Peeta nods. “I should check on Katniss anyways. See if she’s hungry or anything.”

We part ways and I move to knock on Effie’s door. I can hear her through the door, sniffling repeatedly, and knows she’s trying to hide any evidence that she’s been crying. I roll my eyes and wait for her to call me in when she feels she’s ready to be seen.

For a second, I’m completely taken aback by the sight of her. She’s changed out of the obnoxious teal colored number she had on at dinner into a simple dressing gown and robe. Her face is devoid of makeup and her straight blonde hair is out from under its wig.

“You should stop wearing all that clown makeup,” I tell her. “You might actually be married by now if people could get a good look at you.”

“Haymitch…” She tries to sound reproachful, but I can see the soft blush in her cheeks.

“Seriously, sweetheart. I’m sorry I don’t always treat you like the lady you are.” I’m as sincere as I possibly can be under the circumstances—I don’t purposefully try to hurt Effie’s feelings, even as
much as I tease her about her clothes and hair, but she’s right…I shouldn’t have taken my bitterness out on her.

“I forgive you.” She flicks her wrists away. “Now, off to bed with you. Tomorrow’s going to be a big, big, big day!”

“What’s tomorrow?”

“The first rehearsal.” She makes a scoffing noise and puts her hands on her hips. “Honestly, doesn’t anyone listen to anything I say?”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Doesn’t anyone—‘“ She cuts off when she realizes I’m smirking. She thrusts her finger at the door, but struggles to hide her own smile. “Out!”

The next morning, I make sure I’m the last one to breakfast, timing it so that everyone else will be done and moving off to get dressed or whatever else before we’re scheduled to leave for the rehearsal. Katniss is the only one sitting at the table when I get there, pushing her food around her plate with a mopey expression.

Her eyes are red and puffy, and I know this will never do.

“You’re supposed to be head-over-heels in love and excited about getting married, sweetheart. Instead you look like we’ve just killed your puppy and are carting you off for your execution.”

“Don’t talk to me, Haymitch.” She snaps back at me.

I pretend her words don’t affect me as I smear jam on a piece of toast. “I’m just saying, you might try to smile a little.”

We don’t speak the rest of the morning, and soon we find ourselves in the holding area where the tributes used to wait before the Tribute Parade. Being here isn’t helping my déjà vu or the ominous feeling that’s continued to linger. I keep trying to tell myself I’m just being paranoid, but I’ve been through far too many Games to let my guard down, especially when Plutarch is planning the ceremony.

“Haymitch.” The devil himself greets me with a smile and a brotherly hug. “So glad we could talk you into this. It wouldn’t be the same without you giving away the bride.”

He congratulates Peeta on his remarkable recovery, then turns to Katniss and sees puffiness of her eyes. “Oh, someone’s going to need some beauty sleep or a lot of makeup. You’ll be glad to know I’ve retained the services of your prep team, Katniss. They’ll have you looking beautiful in no time.”

Katniss looks like she’s going to rip his face off, but Peeta grips her hand to steady her and I feel a wave of jealousy surge up before I remember that I can’t care about her any more. I’m her mentor. That’s all I’m allowed to be now.

“So, here’s what I envision,” Plutarch begins, using his hands to help us visualize the ceremony. “I want white horses and a gleaming carriage—not like the tribute’s carriage, but something magnificent. Haymitch and Katniss will ride from here into the City Circle. We’ll have VIP chairs set up in the circle with an aisle running between them. Peeta will be waiting on the steps of the President’s mansion. Haymitch, you’ll walk Katniss down the aisle, then up the stairs, present her to Peeta—maybe a little kiss on the cheek—and stand beside Peeta as they exchange their vows.

“Magnificent, don’t you think?” Plutarch looks thoroughly pleased with himself. “The three victors of District 12, standing in unity in the Capital. The country will eat it up!”
“You you’re not going to release any mutts, or drop booby trapped parachutes on us?” I can’t stop myself from asking.

“Haymitch,” Plutarch says with a laugh. “It’s a wedding, not the Games.”

I look around at where we’re standing. “Could have fooled me.”

I hear Plutarch calling to me as I walk away from them. My part’s easy enough. I don’t need to rehearse it. I wander through the familiar corridors of the training center, silent now that it’s only use is to house us for Katniss’ wedding. I can feel the imprint of so many children in the walls, in the floors, in the equipment that lies untouched. So many dead. So many I knew. So many who would probably agree with me about this being some sort of trap. When I find myself on Ceasar Flickerman’s stage, dimmed except for emergency lights, I sit in the chair that I once occupied 25 years ago and, just as I did then, plan my strategy. If Plutarch does have something sinister up his sleeve, I want to be ready.

I want to believe that I am just being paranoid, but Katniss and I have been so out of touch with the rest of the world that Snow could have been miraculously brought back to life and retaken control of the Capitol and we would never be the wiser. I don’t much care about my survival, but Katniss and Peeta have been through too much for it to end here.

“I know that look.” Katniss’ voice draws me out of my thoughts and I look towards the sound to see her standing at the edge of the stage. Katniss crosses the stage and sits in Caesar’s chair, looking at me stoically. “That’s your planning look. Do you really think we’re in danger, Haymitch?”

“What does your gut tell you?”

She looks down at her hands in her lap, then quietly says, “That I shouldn’t be marrying Peeta. That I should be with you.”

“You know that’s not possible.”

“Why?” She asks tremulously. “Why won’t you just admit you love me? Why do you want me to be with Peeta?”

“Because I’m not good enough for you, Katniss!” The words explode from my mouth, silencing her. “We don’t get along. We’re constantly at each other’s throats, trying to rip the other apart. Is that the kind of relationship you want? Come on, sweetheart, even you’re not that stupid.”

“I’m not saying this is perfect, Haymitch, but whatever we have…at least it’s real. I love Peeta, but nothing feels right with him now. Maybe it’s the war and how much he’s changed, I don’t know…but I don’t want to marry him on the off chance that he’ll be normal again someday.”

“But you’d marry me on the off chance that we might not kill each other.” I mock.

“I never said I wanted to marry you,” she says matter-of-factly. “I simply said that I don’t want to marry Peeta.”

“Then don’t marry him.” I tell her impatiently. “You don’t need my permission to dump him, Katniss.”

“Haymitch.” She grinds out my name between clenched teeth, pounds her fists on the arms of the chair, then practically leaps from her chair into my lap, straddling my legs as she grabs my face. “You’re so…dense!”
Then she’s kissing me so passionately, there’s no room to doubt how strongly she feels for me. Love, hate, impatience, desire, hope…I taste all of this and more in her kiss and realize that it’s mirrored back at her just as strongly from me.

I reach up and cup her face as the kiss naturally tapers off. “This is such a bad idea, Katniss.”

“So you’ve told me before.” She whispers, dropping her forehead against mine.

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TBC
"This is such a bad idea, Katniss." Haymitch warns me.

"So you've told me before." I feel so close to the end goal that I'm almost shaking with anticipation. "Tell me you love me, Haymitch."

"You know I do, sweetheart." His voice is soft, barely a breath against my face, but the way he says 'sweetheart' this time isn't patronizing, and it makes my heart flutter. "But we still have one very big problem."

I pull back to look at him, knowing what he's going to say. "Peeta."

"And the wedding." He adds. "Plutarch will not be happy if you pull out of his big event. Possibly the only thing worse than defying the Capitol, is making the Gamemakers look bad. There may be no more Hunger Games, but Plutarch will forever be a Gamemaker."

"Is that why you don't trust him with the wedding?"

"That's one reason." He tells me, but doesn't elaborate.

I study Haymitch's face for a long moment—his gaze is off to the side and there's a slight wrinkle in his brow. He's planning. I can't help but smile, wishing I could be inside his head—however frightening that might be—just for a few seconds to hear his inner thoughts. A smile begins to creep onto his face and his eyes finally flick back to mine.

"What's the one thing the people in the Capitol really want?"

I take a minute to think, but only one thought comes to mind. I smirk at him, "Fur underclothes in the winter?"

Haymitch laughs, not expecting that response and it takes him a second to recover. "No. Clever, but no."

"What then?" I'm dying to know what he's thinking now.

"Entertainment." He pauses, letting me soak in the simple word. "That's what the Hunger Games were to them—entertainment. It was Snow's way to control the districts, but the Capitol people were so far removed from the danger of ever being reaped for the Games, that it was never real to them. The deaths were real, sure, but it was no different than the gladiator tournaments of ancient Rome. The more excitement and drama and blood, the more they ate it up."

"Which is why the Gamemakers always had to create new dangers." I knew all of this, of course, and now Haymitch's thoughts are starting to become clearer. "What do you intend to do?"

"I'm not sure yet. Maybe something during the ceremony. But I think we should let Peeta be in on it, and decide if he wants to be a part of our own little game."
“Yeah,” I say glumly. Having to tell Peeta that I didn’t want to marry him, that I wanted to be with Haymitch, was not something I was looking forward to. I wasn’t sure how he was going to react to the news. So far he had taken everything in stride—his real/not real game seemed to help him cope and sort out his thoughts, but I knew that the hairline trigger to his rage could be pulled at any time and send him into a complete frenzy. “I think I should be the one to tell him, Haymitch. I owe him that much.”

He nods, knowing I’m right, then pulls me into a kiss before looking at me intently. “This is your last chance to back out, Katniss. You can still walk away from me. Peeta never has to know.”

“I will always choose you, Haymitch. Always.”

We decide to go back to the suite separately so that I have time to talk to Peeta, then—depending on his reaction—we will all sit down together and work out some kind of a plot to foil the wedding. The elevator ride seems way too short as I try to figure out what I’m going to say to Peeta, but when it lets me off at the penthouse, Effie and the Avox servers are the only ones around.

“Where’s Peeta?”

“Oh, come now, Katniss, surely you know about the tradition of the bride and groom not seeing each other until the wedding day.”

“But the wedding’s still a few days away.” I say, my heart suddenly thudding so hard in my chest it actually hurts.

“Plutarch thought it would add to the moment.”

Plutarch…oh God…Haymitch. I spin around, back towards the elevators, jamming my finger into the button repeatedly.

“I’m afraid they’ve restricted us to stay here until the next rehearsal, dear. Plutarch really loves the dramatic effect.”

No… No, no no no no…this can’t be happening. “When did Plutarch decide all of this?”

“Oh, just a short while ago. Before you came up, really. He wanted to tell you, but you were off somewhere.”

My heart sinks along with the rest of my body and I slide to the floor as I start to shake, covering my ears with my hands. I try to tell myself that this is a coincidence, that Haymitch will come up here—free to move about the different floors—and we’ll simply have to rework our plan, but my gut tells me that Haymitch and I were never really alone downstairs.

“Katniss?” Effie is squatting down in front of me, her face full of concern. “Katniss, what’s wrong?”

“Haymitch,” I manage. “Effie, you have to go find Haymitch. I think he’s trouble.”

“That would be nothing new.” She says dismissively.

“Haymitch and I were plotting to ruin the wedding.” I tell her, trying to make her see the seriousness of the situation. “Just before I came back up. Just before Plutarch decided to separate Peeta and I.”
“Why?” Her expression is truly baffled. “Don’t you want to marry Peeta?”

“No.” I say miserably. “Effie, I love Haymitch.”

Effie looks like she’s going to faint and starts to fan herself with her folded paper fan. “Oh, my… Oh, Katniss…Haymitch? Oh, you can’t be serious.”

“Effie!” I reach out and physically shake her. “Please! Go find Haymitch.”

“Believe me, dear, I want to help—I do—but I’m not permitted to leave either.” She seems to consider the situation a little more seriously. “Do you really think something’s happened to him?”

“Haymitch said it from the moment we arrived that something didn’t feel right.” I wish I would have believed him then. Who knows what all Plutarch has been spying on us about over the past couple of days?

“Well…” Effie looks pale, even under the white makeup. “Haymitch is very clever, and surprisingly quick…I’m sure, if something were to happen, he would be alright. Don’t you think?”

“Unless he walks straight into their trap like I just did.” I answer glumly.

Night falls, but both Effie and I are too sick with worry and fear to eat or sleep. It’s quiet without Peeta and Haymitch, and each moment that passes just makes me feel more anxious. Having spent some time with Plutarch during the rebellion, I feel I know how his mind works, and it isn’t much different than Snow’s. He won’t hurt Haymitch or Peeta, but he will find some way to either pit them against each other or me. He’ll want to create the most dramatic event possible, and Haymitch and I have given him just the twist he needs. Nothing could be juicier to this bunch than some torrid affair between mentor and victor, and their secret rendezvous to ruin the wedding.

The thought makes me sick to my stomach and I pace the floor to try and wear off some of my anxiety. I can’t help but wonder if Peeta has any idea what’s happened and why.

Suddenly, the screen in the common room flashes to life and images of myself and Peeta begin to play on the screen, starting with that first day at the reaping. I’m drawn towards the screen, unable to look away as my story with Peeta begins to unfold—the interviews, his admission of his crush, clips of us during the Hunger Games, the nightlock berries, the victory tour. I know Plutarch has put this together, painting a magical romance between me and Peeta, before the images begin to change. Suddenly their announcing the Quarter Quell and a shot cuts to me in my own home as I run out the door, then picking up again with Haymitch and Peeta agreeing to keep me safe—Peeta telling Haymitch that he will volunteer if Haymitch’s name is pulled. It cuts to when I show up at Haymitch’s next, to a clip of us drinking and brokering our own deal to keep Peeta safe. Scene after scene of Peeta and I in the Quarter Quell, and then the explosion as my arrow pierced the shield. There’s a montage of the war that breaks out—the bombings in the district, people hurt and dying, me as the Mockingjay, shots of Peeta’s dramatic rescue that I’m not surprised Plutarch filmed, and the first time I see him after his hijacking when he tries to strangle me. The shots after that are pieced together in a way that make it look like I’m breaking down in response to Peeta. My attack on Haymitch when I scratch his face, repeatedly trying to knock myself out after I was first rescued from the arena, even my break down on the justice steps when Haymitch had held me while I cried.

I have to say that the clips, paired with whatever musical score that has been written for this propos, are powerful, but I know what they’re going to lead up to and I’m not sure I want to watch.
Sure enough, there’s footage of my platoon in the Capitol, of me and Peeta—him in handcuffs—pieced together so that it looks like we’re growing back together…falling back in love. It all leads to a crescendo when the parachutes rain down…and Prim and I go up in flames. There are clips of my recovery, of Haymitch—not Peeta—sitting by my bedside, looking disheveled and—at times—devastated.

I have no idea what angle Plutarch is trying to get at when he begins to show images of Haymitch and myself on our way back to District 12, and I’m not surprised to discover that there were cameras planted in each of our homes as I watch clips of when I’d run to him that first night, our first kiss. It’s cut to when he’s told me to stay with him, but the only audio of the clip we hear is us agreeing that this would only last until Peeta comes back. Our voices are blended with the music to make for a powerful effect, following by a series of clips of us having sex, of us laughing…crying…screaming at each other. Clips of Haymitch drinking himself into a stupor after I leave. It flashes back to the Capitol, to Peeta’s release, to his traveling by train back to 12, and then the two of us standing in my kitchen after Plutarch, kissing as if it’s the first time we’ve seen each other since I came home. Now the images have changed to Peeta and I, lying in bed or sitting together talking as we played his real/not real game. Another audio clip plays.

“Real or not real, you love me.”

“Real.” My voice answers on screen.

Now we’re sitting on my couch, Haymitch leaning against me as we break the news of our impending wedding to him. The voiceover continues through this clip—edited to cut out Haymitch’s remarks about Snow and Coin—up to the hostile exchange where Haymitch told me he would gladly give me away.

Even though I’ve lived all of these moments, I feel the tears streaming down my face, but not because I’m affected by what I’m seeing. I know that all of Panem is seeing this as well, including Peeta. He shouldn’t be finding out this way.

We cut to that night I went to Haymitch for comfort, the voiceover amplifying my, “I need you” and him telling me to go back to Peeta.

“I’m pregnant.” The voiceover says. “And it’s not Peeta’s.”

I cover my face with my hands, but I continue to watch through my fingers, horrified about how much they’ve filmed of us without our knowledge. All of my private moments with Peeta and Haymitch now at the viewing pleasure of the entire country. I shudder to think about what my mother and Gale must be thinking of me right now. What Peeta must think…

The entire rooftop scene plays, unedited, and I hate myself for the way I treated him, realizing now what he had been trying to do. He must really love me. I think brokenheartedly. I put my head on my knees, no longer able to watch as the propos airs my dirty laundry.

“What does your gut tell you?” Haymitch’s voice cuts across me, editing out everything before that moment. I cringe as I hear my own answer, knowing I had simply wanted to get everything out in the open and try to change his mind about me rather than consider that we were part of the game.

“Tell me you love me, Haymitch.”

“You know I do, sweetheart.” Even now, my heart still flutters.

“This is your last chance to back out, Katniss. You can still walk away from me. Peeta never has to know.”
“I will always choose you, Haymitch. Always.”

The video ends on the last kiss I shared with Haymitch before we parted ways, before we walked into their trap, and then suddenly I’m looking at a screen split equally in three parts. In the middle section, is me. A live shot. I stare at the screen, blankly, unable to move. On one side of my section is Peeta, looking just as shocked and devastated as I imagined he would be. On the other, Haymitch. His lip is split and slightly swollen, crusted with dried blood. His eyes are burning with rage as he stares into the camera, defiance written into every hard line of his face. Though he’s not speaking, I know he’s talking to me. He’s telling me to fight.

The two screens on either side of me go black and words appear across the entire screen.

ONLY ONE CAN LIVE.

The words fade out and more fade in.

WHO WILL KATNISS CHOOSE NOW?

When the screen finally shuts itself off, the only thing I can do is scream.

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TBC
“Brilliant, don’t you think?” Plutarch says as the screen goes blank. “I could not have asked for anything more perfect that what you and Katniss have been giving me.”

“How long have you been planning this?” I ask him, quietly seething.

“A while.” He admits with a smug smile. “The chemistry between you two was phenomenal. I knew it was only a matter of time before the sparks started to fly. Even if you hadn’t given me the love triangle to go with—which is pure gold, Haymitch. Pure. Gold.—I had enough love/hate footage of the two of you from District 13 to make the audience anticipate who she would save.”

“So, I was right…this is the last arena.”

“It’s what the audience wants, Haymitch.”

“And the wedding? Your carriage and all the frilly details?”

“Won’t it be visually striking to have Katniss killing one of her lovers in that beautiful white gown?”

“You’re disgusting, Plutarch.”

“Ah,” He ticks his finger at me and smiles. “I’m inspired.”

As he stands to leave, I offer a small suggestion. “Word of advice, Plutarch. When it comes time for Katniss to make her choice…be careful where you stand.”

Plutarch pats me on the shoulder with a small laugh. “Just so you know, Haymitch. I hope she picks you. Oh…you’ll understand I’ve got to send in a couple of guards to rough you up, won’t you? It’ll be more dramatic when Katniss sees you’ve been mistreated. I promise, if you live, we’ll repair any damage.”

I meet his eyes with a deadly stare. “You better hope she picks Peeta, because if I live, I can guarantee you that Katniss and I will not stop hunting you until we die.”

There is fear written on his face for a fleeting second before he covers it with his usual smile. “That’s the passion I want to see in the arena, Haymitch. Hold onto that.”

“Don’t worry,” I vow, “I will.”

As Plutarch leaves, 3 guards file into the room they’ve decided to use as my holding cell. I size them up, wondering if I can get any pop shots off before the three of them start in on me.

“Three on one,” I call, hoping Plutarch is still within earshot. “That’s hardly fair…for them.”

The slap of a nightstick in a gloved palm draws my attention to the middle guard and I brace
myself for the pain. The nightstick swings at my face, connecting with the bridge of my nose and I hear the crack of the bone breaking as the blood starts to pour from both nostrils. The pain is blinding for a second, dazing me, and I flash back to my own Hunger Games, to the struggle with the Careers when I was slammed in the face with a makeshift bat.

The next strike comes to my ribs, knocking the air out of me, then another on the back of my head. I realize the three of them are surrounding me, and—half on instinct, half simply unable to keep myself on my feet—I drop to my knees. I’m dizzy with pain, bleeding, and certain more than my nose has been broken, but the guards go on for several minutes, making sure that there will be no mistaking how much I’ve paid for being in love with Katniss.

The irony that Mica died for loving me and that I may very well die for Katniss makes me laugh before my assailants finally give up and let me fall in a heap to the floor. It hurts to breathe too deeply, so I take shallow breaths as blood begins to pool under me. I know they won’t let me die—they want that honor to be Katniss’—so I don’t bother worrying about my injuries. Instead I worry about Katniss and Peeta.

I can’t even begin to imagine what Peeta must be feeling right now. To know that he’s been betrayed by both of us—lied to, misled, cheated on… If Katniss doesn’t kill me, Peeta definitely will. Not that I don’t deserve it. I feel responsible for this mess. I let my guard down with Katniss, I let her get too close. I made the mistake of caring for her during her first Hunger Games. If I’d have treated her the way I treated all the other Tributes, none of this would be happening now. But that damn girl has a way of sticking with people, and I wasn’t immune to that effect.

I hope that Katniss finds a way to fight this, to get to Plutarch before the arena, to start a new rebellion against what she’s being forced to do, but I know she won’t. She’ll try to find a way to save both of us. That’s just Katniss.

“I’ll always choose you, Haymitch. Always.”

Yeah, sweetheart? I guess we’ll see in a few days, won’t we?

When I’m kicked into awareness by the hard toe of a boot, I involuntarily groan in pain. I realize I must have passed out where I’d fallen, and I’m covered in dried blood and aching from my head down to my ribs. I wonder if they’d be gentlemanly enough to let me have a stiff drink, but I can’t seem to open my mouth to ask.

“Plutarch wants you washed up and presentable in 10 minutes.”

Good luck with that. I think as they haul me to my feet. My breath catches in my throat, making me wheeze and I’m sure they’ve broken my ribs. They carry me into the shower—clothes and all—and turn on the cold water. When I gasp, the pain in my ribs intensifies, and I cry out. They let the water run over me until it runs clear down the drain, then haul me out—soaking wet—and drag me into the common area where another camera has been set up.

“The air has been turned down in the room, so by the time I’m pushed into a chair in front of the camera, I’m shivering from the cold.

“Perfection.” Plutarch says as he comes into view. He lifts my chin, making me grunt as my sore muscles protest. “So, here’s what we’re doing today, Haymitch…we’re going to film tonight’s special. A video message from you to Katniss telling her who you think she should save. You and Peeta will both have 5 minutes to plead your case, and say your last goodbyes. Remember, from the heart, Haymitch.”

I’m shaking now with cold, a piece of hair hangs over my eye, and I can see water dripping slowly off the end. “I don’t need 5 minutes, Plutarch.” I growl at him.
“Save it for the camera, Haymitch. Are we ready to roll?”

A cameraman gives him a thumbs up and then the red light on the camera comes on.

“Katniss…” Saying her name has that same sticking effect on me and I feel myself choke a little on the word. I close my eyes and take a shallow breath. If this is the last thing I get to say to her…so be it. “I told you once that love was a liability—I guess you see I was right about that too…I really hate being right sometimes; not always, just in cases like this. As much as I love you, Katniss, I don’t want to be your liability. If you love me as much as you say you do, then…choose Peeta. You have to choose Peeta. I know you still love him—you told me so yourself, so don’t try to deny it now, sweetheart. You’re not that good of a liar, anyways. I’ve lived a lifetime of regrets, Katniss. A lifetime of heartache. But you don’t have to. You and Peeta have a chance to be happy. Trust me, sweetheart…I’m not worth saving.”

“Cut.” Plutarch says as I fall silent. I can’t tell whether or not he’s happy about what I said, but he doesn’t ask me to retake it, so I suppose he’ll find a way to spin it into something the audience will drool over.

I’m led back to my room and given a pair of dry clothes to change into, a bowl of soup, then allowed to sleep for the rest of the day, though all I really want is a goddamn drink.

When the video messages are scheduled to air, a guard makes sure that I’m awake, though Plutarch doesn’t sit with me through the airing of this one. I guess he’s still sour over my plea that Katniss save Peeta instead.

My message is first. I look like a drowned and tortured rat, and I know this will crush Katniss. She’ll blame herself for my abuse, and add my name to her list of people to avenge…the list of people she tries to forget when she’s in my arms. I feel oddly at peace with my plea. I try to think of what life might be like if luck was ever on my side—what it might be like if Katniss and I could be together, but I’ve been so alone and so unhappy for so long that I can’t imagine our future. I can’t imagine being a father. Peeta will do right by her, of that I’m sure…and that’s enough. It has to be.

When Peeta appears on the screen, there’s not a scratch on him, but I quickly begin to understand Plutarch’s disappointment in my message.

“Five minutes isn’t a lot of time to say everything you want to say.” He tells the camera stoically. “Everyone knows I would have never survived the Games without you, Katniss…and maybe that’s the way it should have been. Everything we’ve been through since then…has it been worth it? If you had just let me die, you could have gone home, lived your life with Gale…or Haymitch…or whoever. Your sister would still be alive. My parents…everyone from our district.”

Peeta pauses for a long moment, obviously trapped in his broken mind. “None of this is your fault, Katniss. I’m the one who started the love story. I’m sorry that I forced you to pretend you love me, Katniss…but I’m not sorry for loving you. The time we had—even when I knew it wasn’t real—was incredible. Those are the memories I want to keep…It’s time for this to end. It’s time for you to go home and live your life. Without me. Thank you for letting me love you, Katniss.”

Peeta fades out, and Caesar Flickerman and Claudius Templesmith come on to commentate on our videos and try to understand our strategies and the dynamics behind the footage. I find myself watching even though I don’t care.

“We polled our viewers after last night’s… exhilarating show to find out who you, the viewers, felt that Katniss would be more inclined to choose.” Mine and Peeta’s names appear on a screen behind them and I blink in surprise. 49% lights up under Peeta’s name. 51% under mine. Caesar
looks impressed by the numbers. “51% for Haymitch Abernathy. Claudius, does that surprise you as much as it surprises me?”

“Oh, yes.” Says the smaller man. “I don’t think any of us were expecting quite the turn of events with Katniss and Haymitch, but I have to say, Caesar…seeing those two together was stirring. Such passion between them. Something I never really got with Katniss and Peeta.”

“I have to disagree with, Claudius.” Caesar tells him. “When I interviewed Katniss and Peeta after their victory, you could feel the love between them. The way they responded to one another…it was magical.”

“Well, Caesar, it looks like only 49% of our viewers still feel that magic between Katniss and Peeta. I think that spark has died, and a new flame has lit up in her life.”

“How do you think Katniss is reacting to these messages tonight? Hearing both of her lovers telling her to save the other. I don’t know if that was planned or not, but I know I was just shocked.”

“One can only imagine the amount of pressure she must be feeling.” Claudius answers. “This is a big decision.”

“That it is, Claudius. That it is. Live in the Capitol. This is Caesar Flickerman.”

“And Claudius Templesmith.”

“Wishing you all a good night.”

At first I’m just annoyed with the Capitol’s continued ignorance and the fact that this is still a game to all of them. But then I can’t believe that 51% of the people watching feel that Katniss will choose me. Now I start to feel conflicted. I want to pace, to move, to do something, but it hurts too damn much.

Would Katniss save me over Peeta? Maybe, I suppose. But her only goal during the rebellion was getting Peeta back. Everything she has done has revolved around saving Peeta, keeping Peeta safe, ensuring his survival. Why should she stop protecting him now?

Because she wants you, moron. I answer myself. I have to think about this long and hard now that the game has changed, now that Peeta and I have both just called for her to save the other. What is my strategy now? To try and convince her Peeta’s right? That I am worth saving? I don’t believe that for a second.

I can’t help but wonder if this will be the final curtain call for all of us. If, once Katniss makes her choice, the people will finally let her go to live the rest of her life without constantly having to choose who lives and who dies. I know this will break Katniss the same way it broke me when Mica died. No matter who she chooses, she will never forget who she had to sacrifice. Will Peeta be able to keep her from falling into despair? He hasn’t suffered loss the way Katniss and I have… he don’t know how to recognize the signs of someone who’s given up on everything. Hell, he can’t even recognize what’s real and not real. How can he save Katniss the way she needs to be saved?

He can’t…but I can. And I’ve just told her not to choose me.

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TBC
“Katniss?” Effie’s voice is small and uncertain as she calls out to me. For the past hour, I’ve been on the roof, looking for the chink in the armor of the force field. I threw a rock at it and promptly had it bounced back to me, so I know the stupid thing is active, but there’s got to be some way out of this. I refuse to stay here and let them continue this absurd game. I can’t sit by while they do God knows what to Haymitch, while they both give up on being saved.

Did Haymitch try to fight them? Was that a warning? Will they kill them both if I refuse to play? Haymitch warned me about making a Gamemaker look bad. The more I think about him, the angrier I get and I whirl around to glare at Effie.

“If you’re not helping me, you’re just slowing me down, Effie.”

“It’s useless, Katniss.” She tells me.

“Every cage has its weak spot,” I tell her with forced patience. “I just have to find it.”

“They’re watching you, they’ll know what you’re trying to do.” She reminds me. “Please, dear… come inside. Let’s get you cleaned up. You’ll feel better after a good night’s rest.”

“I’m not tired.” I grumble.

“Katniss Everdeen!” Effie nearly shrieks, sounding more like my mother than my own mother. “You come inside this instant!”

I blink at her in shock. It might be funny if she wasn’t so completely serious, and I find myself hanging my head as I make my way inside like a scolded child. Effie takes me by the shoulders and guides me down the hall, past my bedroom. I look back at her, my brow furrowed but she gives me a slight shake of her head and keeps me moving forward.

“I’ve drawn you a bath in my room. Mine has a wonderfully large tub. It’ll do you wonders.”

I’m about to ask her what the hell she’s doing when she guides me into the large bathroom. The two Avox girls are standing just around the corner of the door against the wall, one with a finger to her blood red lips.

I turn to look at Effie who is looking at me anxiously, obviously not able to tell me what’s going on without Plutarch overhearing it. I know that the Avox girls must be hidden from the view of the cameras, so I hug Effie tightly. “Thank you.” Anyone watching will think I’m just thanking her for the bath. As I slip inside, one of the Avox girls slips from the room, closing the door behind her.

The other girl begins to undress, motioning for me to remove my clothes as well when I just stand there watching her. She carefully hands over the red blouse and matching pants and I pull them on before she affixes the red collar around my neck. The girl points to the stool in front of the mirror where Effie must sit to put on her makeup, then dips her fingers in a blood red gel before she
begins to smooth it through my hair. I watch my reflection as my hair transforms from a dark brown into the trademark red hues of the Avoxes. So this is why they all seem to have the same color hair.

The Avox twists my hair into a tight bun, securing it with her own headpiece and smooths out any imperfections and bumps. I watch her reach into Effie’s makeup bag, pulling out the pale white foundation and powder. She covers my face, neck, shoulders and any other skin still exposed by the uniform until I’m as pale as death. She removes the red plastic eyebrows from her own face and sticks them onto me, then finds the deepest red lipstick she can before she covers my lips. When she’s completed my transformation, she steps back to observe her work, then nods for me to take a look.

There is no possible way anyone could mistake me for anything other than an Avox. I look nothing like myself, except for my eyes, but as Avoxes are meant to avoid eye contact and speech, I should have no problems. The last thing the Avox does is slips off her shoes. I put my own feet into them and she holds up a finger, gesturing for me to wait. She pulls me over along the wall, knocks twice, then we wait. For a minute, I have no idea what’s supposed to happen until the door opens and the other Avox girl steps in carrying several towels.

Oh. Clever. The one that has entered hands me what looks like some kind of thick card with a strip on the back and her photo on the front. They motion for me to leave and I do, pulling the door closed behind me and consciously trying to move in the way an Avox would.

“Girl.” Effie calls to me. I turn to look at her and she’s got an anxious expression on her face. “I would like you to bring me tea at 3 and 9, please. Precisely 3 and 9.”

I give a slight bow, having no idea what this means, but know it’s code for something. 3 and 9…3 and 9. Think Katniss…what is 3 and 9? Numbers…Time…Districts…Floors!!! Those are the floors Peeta and Haymitch must be on!! I almost head for the general elevator, when I remember that Avoxes are supposed to use a service elevator. When I get there, I see an electronic device and understand the card’s use. I swipe it through the device and the doors slide open.

After I step on and the doors slide closed behind me, I stop for a minute to try and formulate my plan. I have no weapons, and probably wouldn’t survive an ambush attempt. I may be able to sneak up on a guard or two, but then what? I’m certainly not strong enough to snap their necks. Then a thought dawns on me…

Effie and I had no guards on our floor. Only the Avoxes to continue serving us…could Peeta and Haymitch be unguarded too? My heart hammers in my chest and I lift my finger to push a floor button. I hesitate, rethinking. If Effie was with me, who was with Peeta? There must be someone with him. I have only one choice. Investigate and see what I’m up against. I have the perfect disguise and this may be my only chance.

I’m about to press the button for the 9th floor—thinking it best to go in descending order, when Effie’s clue comes back to mind. “Precisely 3 and 9.” She must be telling me what order to go in. I find myself wondering how Effie knows—if she knows—but I don’t have time to ponder it. I jam my finger into the 3 and hold my breath as the elevator descends.

When the lift comes to a stop, I can feel myself tensing, ready for action, but remind myself that I can’t give up myself up yet. I force myself into submissive posture—head slightly bowed, eyes down, hands folded in front of me—as the doors open. I scan the area with my peripheral vision, carefully not to move my eyes too much or too quickly, and try to move slowly but with purpose. An Avox wouldn’t have to think about their tasks, they would simply do what was needed.

As I carefully emerge from the elevator into the Avox station, another Avox girl is standing near a
supply of clean towels, two of them folded in her hands. She looks as if she’s been waiting for me and immediately thrusts the towels towards me. The pieces quickly begin to fall into place. The Avoxes are free to move about from floor to floor, trading off as needed. They must have been passing information to each other, trying to figure out a way to help us escape, and developed the plan of using decoys to get me from floor to floor. Upstairs, there were two Avoxes trading off to fool the cameras into believing it was the same girl. As no one pays them much attention, whoever was watching probably didn’t even bother to notice if it was the same one.

It was an ingenious plan, really. It also makes sense of why she’s giving me the towels. The bathroom is the only safe place—no cameras. She looks at me anxiously, a look that tells me to get moving, so I do. This floor is different than the one I’ve stayed on, but the layout is relatively the same. As I walk down the hallway towards the bedrooms, I can see two guards stationed in the common area. One of them appears to be sleeping on duty, the other one is staring out the window.

I listen for any sound to indicate what room I should go into and nearly pass a door where I hear the faint sound of running water. Carefully, I slip in, trying not to make any noise that might bring me unwanted attention. The bathroom door is slightly ajar, and I take a brief glance around the room, but there’s nothing to tell me if it’s Peeta or Haymitch in the bathroom. As I push the door open, I can see an Avox girl to my right and Peeta sitting on the closed lid of the toilet to my left. I nearly drop my guise at the sight of him, but remember that the Avox and I need to be synchronous in order to keep all prying eyes from being privy to our plan. I swiftly move into the right, waiting until the Avox takes my place, leaving the bathroom and closing the door.

“Peeta…” I sigh, trying to keep my voice down, though I’m sure the water running is helping to mask our voices. We move into each other’s arms at once, holding on tightly to one another.

“Katniss.” He says, squeezing me so hard it almost hurts.

“Peeta, I’m sorry…about Haymitch…I wanted to tell you. I—”

“Katniss.” There’s a slight smile on his face and he reaches up to brush my cheek with the backs of his fingers. “It’s okay. I mean…it is what it is, right? It was never going to be me. I just kind of always figured it would have been Gale.”

“I never meant for anything to happen with Haymitch. I do love you, Peeta. I do. So much.”

He pulls me back into another hug, but his voice is tinged with sadness now. “Just not enough.”

I want to cry. I want to comfort him and tell him how sorry I am for doing this to him, but I only have time to hug him as tight as I can. “Tell me we can still be friends, Peeta. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Let’s just see if we survive this first.” He tells me. “Then we can talk about the future.”

“Please don’t hate Haymitch for this.”

“I don’t hate either of you, Katniss. Surprised as hell, maybe, but I don’t hate you.”

I feel hope surge up within me but try to keep the happy grin off my face. “So what do we do? How do we get out of here? I think they’re holding Haymitch on 9, but I don’t know how I can get you to the service elevator without the guards seeing, or without the cameras watching us.”

He nods in agreement. “You’re the only one who can move around without being noticed.”

We both think for a long moment. “Do you think you can get down to the training room? To the
“Weapons?”

“Maybe…” I consider. “But that’s sure to blow my cover.”

“Go to Haymitch.” He tells me. “He’s the strategist. He can tell us what to do.”

“I don’t want to leave you here.” I tell him, afraid that I won’t get another chance like this.

Peeta cups my face in his hands and leans in to gently kiss my lips. “You’ll come back for me. I know you will.”

“I will.” I affirm, determined. I’m about to walk out the door again, when I remember that I need my decoy to trade places with me. “Peeta, get in the shower so that it looks like you really did bathe. The Avox will need to come back for the wet towels so that we can trade places.”

I turn around while Peeta undresses and steps under the shower spray, listening to him slosh water on his skin and rinse his hair before he cuts the water off, steps out and dries himself off. I hear the towel hit the floor and a blush starts to creep up my cheekbones.

“Be careful, Katniss.” Peeta says quietly before opening the door and stepping out.

I wait, my heart pounding in my ears, for what feels like hours until the Avox girl returns. She’s carrying more towels this time, closing the door behind her. I look at her curiously as she sets the towels down on the counter and begins to unfold one. Wrapped in the towel is a handwritten note.

12:01 is all that is written. I look at the Avox with confusion and watch her unfold the second towel, pulling out a long, slender dagger. She cradles it in her hands and holds it out to me. As I hold the blade, it feels like it comes to life and my heart skips a hopeful beat. Beetee.

“What happens at 12:01?”

The Avox points to me, then points to the ceiling, but I can’t make out what she means. She picks up Peeta’s wet towels and conceals my new blade within then ushers me towards the door. I turn back to look at her for a moment and she kisses her first three fingers, then holds her hand out in the symbol that has come to mean freedom to so many.

So the rebels are still watching, waiting, doing what they can to help their Mockingjay. Again I’m threatened by tears, but I hold them back as I repeat the gesture to her, then slip out of the bathroom. I make my way carefully to the Avox station, listening to Peeta chatting almost casually with the guards. Leave it to him to win them over.

When I make it to the station, yet another Avox is waiting there, blocking my escape to the elevator. She gestures to an unmarked door, then uses her fingers to mime walking up stairs. Then she holds her hands out as if telling me to stop and taps a finger against her wrist.

I’ve never liked charades.

She repeats the motions again, seeing that I can’t interpret them, and looks so distressed, that I simply nod in understanding and move to the door. It opens quietly and I find myself in a stairwell, probably used only in emergencies.

And then it clicks. 12:01. Beetee. The stairs instead of the elevator. I don’t know what the master technician has in store, but I understand the girl’s mime gestures clearly as I ascend six flights of stairs: Go upstairs and wait until 12:01. I have no watch and no way to tell what time it is now, but I trust I’ll know precisely when 12:01 rolls around. I grip the dagger tight in my hand as I reach the landing on the 9th floor. Then, I wait.
There’s nothing quite like waiting for someone else to decide your fate. There’s an element of needless anxiety, like the Sword of Damocles is swinging over your head and you’re just waiting to see if it’s going to drop on you. There’s nothing you can do about; no amount of willing things to change will make any difference. So why does anyone bother being anxious? I’ve decided to be a trailblazer and take the path of least resistance. If Katniss chooses me, great; if she chooses Peeta, fine. I have no control over it now, so I’m not going to waste my time with trivial pursuits.

Instead, I turn on the projector screen to an image of the oceanfront, dim the lights in the room and listen to the sounds of waves crashing on the shore. I hover just on the cusp of sleep, still in too much pain to ever lose full consciousness, so when the waves abruptly cut off I immediately open my eyes to find myself shrouded in darkness—the only light entering my room from the glow of city lights. My automatic response is to jerk upright, to figure out what’s going on, but my body has no problem reminding me of my injuries. I wince, and take a minute to let the pain subside a little before I move a little slower, using my other senses to detect any potential threats as I peer through the darkness. I hear someone order a watch at my door while the other guards are ordered to positions around the apartment preparing for an ambush.

As I’m nearing the door, as eager to find out what’s going on as the guards are, I hear a quiet struggle followed by a thump, and the door swings in slowly.

“Haymitch?” Katniss’s whisper is like music to my ears and I’m at the door in an instant. There’s no time for heartfelt reunions, as I can hear the other guards still searching the apartment. “We have to go. Now.”

I do my best to follow her quick, cat-like retreat through the darkened hallway, leading me towards the Avox station. I’m biting my lip to keep from groaning in pain, my ribs protesting the movement and stealing my breath. I press my hand against my side, pressing on, and then we’re slipping out a door and into the stairwell. I lean heavily against the wall, needing a minute to catch my breath, but Katniss is right there, holding onto my arm.

“Come on, Haymitch! We don’t have any time to waste!”

“Give me a second, sweetheart.” I growl, annoyed and in pain despite however glad I am to see her.

“What’s wrong?” She finally asks, looking me over for injuries.

“My ribs are broken.”

Katniss looks down the way we need to go, then up to the next flight of stairs. “I need you to run, just up that flight of stairs. That’s all. Can you do it?”

I look at the stairs, knowing this is going to hurt like hell, but nod.
“I’ll be back. Just stay there.” She holds the handle of her knife out towards me. “You’re better with a knife than I am. I’m going to find Peeta. Then we have to go back up for Effie. I’m getting you all out.”

How did I know... “Katniss…”

“Haymitch, don’t argue. Go!”

She’s down the flight of stairs before I can blink, looking up at me pleadingly from the landing for only a moment before she continues running down to find Peeta. I hold my breath, press my hand more firmly against my ribs, then take the steps two at a time. When I reach the landing, I don’t stop; instead I force myself up to the top floor. To Effie.

If Katniss is going to do this, she can’t do it alone. My face is wet with tears and sweat and I can only take shallow gasps of air, but I reach my goal. I’m lightheaded and in excruciating agony when I fall through the door, dropping the knife and collapsing to the floor as lack of oxygen finally wins out and my body gives out.

“Who’s there?!” Effie’s shaky voice demands from another room. “Who is it?! Answer me! I-I-I’m armed!”

“Ef…’I wheeze, unable to speak. “Effie…” I try again, with not much more result.

“Haymitch?” She’s on her knees in front of me in an instant, dropping a butter knife to the floor as her arms like a vice around me that make me scream in pain. She lets go at once. “Haymitch…oh, I’m sorry. What have they done to you? What can I do?”

She’s firing questions at me left and right as I sit there unable to speak, still clutching my ribs and trying to catch my breath before I pass out.

“Speak to me, Haymitch!”

“Shut. Up.” I manage to finally grind out. Effie stops at once, taken aback by my rudeness, but says nothing. I find a shallow breath after a moment, and try to quickly fill her in. “Katniss came for me. She killed one guard that I know off. She’s gone for Peeta.”

“What should we do?”

“I don’t know.” I grunt. Effie helps ease my back against the wall, which helps—though not much—and I try to formulate the next leg of our plan. “How did Katniss get out?”

“The Avoxes.” Effie tells me. “They disguised her as one of them and informed me what floors you and Peeta were being held on. But that’s all I know.”

“The Avoxes aren’t likely to act on their own.” I try to think of the likely causes behind their actions and the black out, but only two possibilities seem probable. “Either the resistance has organized a rescue attempt once they realized what Plutarch was up to…or this is also part of his game.”

A strangled sob escapes Effie’s throat and she clamps her hands over her mouth. I pity her in this moment. Effie’s dream had always been to be the escort of a winning district like 1 or 2. An escort for the Hunger Games was a posh career, one that brought a certain degree of celebrity. Effie was just as clueless as the rest of the Capitol people when it came to the real atrocities and horrors—she truly believed that the tributes were privileged to be selected for the Games. Now that she had been imprisoned and was now part of Plutarch’s game, she’d had more than a taste of what it was all really about. She’d been traumatized. To think we were so close to being rescued now, only to
consider the possibility of another trap was something she couldn’t handle. I listen to her cry, reaching out to hold her hand, as I try to figure out what our next move should be.

I’m too injured for any type of physical escape—be it fighting our way out or simply running as fast and as far as we can. Unless Peeta and Katniss can get down to the weapons storage, the only defense we have is Katniss’ knife. I see the butter knife next to Effie and I laugh, despite how much it kills me.

“You were going to try and kill me with a butter knife?” I ask her. She wipes her eyes, giving me a cross look.

“It was the best I could find in the dark.”

I squeeze her hand gently, still amused, and let go to point at Katniss’ dagger. “Take that. It’ll do a bit more damage with less effort.”

“What about you? You need a weapon.”

“Look at me, sweetheart…I can’t even stand up.”

“What are we going to do, Haymitch?”

Before I can respond, the door kicks in next to us. Effie shrieks, and brandishes Katniss’ knife out in front of her as she looks away, slashing wildly in an attempt to cut her attacker to ribbons. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness enough that I can plainly see Peeta in the doorway, carrying Katniss over his shoulder. I try to get to my feet as concern for Katniss takes over, but the pain is too much now.

“Effie! Knock it off and help Peeta with Katniss.”

Peeta carries Katniss in and slams the door behind him, dropping two guns next to me. “They’ll be coming. We have to barricade the door. Effie, I need something to make bandages out of.”

“What’s wrong with her?” I ask, feeling helpless as Katniss hangs down his back like a rag down.

“She’s been shot.” Peeta says shortly before whisking Katniss away to the living room.

I shove the pain deep inside me and force myself to get to my feet. I stagger for a moment, catching myself on the wall, then move as quickly as I can towards Katniss. Effie is rushing around, trying to find anything she can possibly make into a bandage. Peeta lays Katniss on the couch, then rips her shirt off without hesitation.

Grunting in pain, I lower myself to my knees at Katniss’ side, seeing the large hole that’s ripped through her shoulder. “Is she shot anywhere else?”

“She’s been shot.” Peeta says shortly before whisking Katniss away to the living room.

I carefully lift Katniss’ shoulder and feel around for an exit wound. My fingers brush against the wet flesh and I know it was a clean shot. I can’t tell if they’ve hit an artery or not, but it doesn’t seem like it. Effie rushes over to me, holding out an armful of items she’s found. I reach for a clean, white sheet and begin to tear it into shreds, folding thick squares of fabric.

“Come here,” I tell Effie, indicating for her to move around me to Katniss’ head. I put one square
of fabric under her, cover the wound on her back and slid Effie’s hand over it, then do the same from the entry wound. “Press as tightly as you can. Keep pressure.”

She nods, though she looks like she’s about to hyperventilate. I turn my focus back to Katniss, running my hands over her to feel for any other gunshots, but I don’t find any. Peeta returns, panting as he stands over my shoulder and watches me wind long strips of the sheet around her arm and shoulder to hold the makeshift gauze in place. I take another sheet Effie has brought over and cover Katniss’ exposed upper body.

“The door?”

“Blocked. I don’t think they’ll get through unless they have a battering ram.”

“Good, that buys us a few more minutes, then. Did Katniss happen to share with you her plan?”

“No.” He says and sits down on the edge of the coffee table. “She came to me earlier to try and work out a plan, but I told her you were the strategist and she needed to find you. It was probably an hour or so later that the power went out. I figured that had to be you and Katniss, but she came back for me alone, so I had no idea what was going on. I only had two guards with me so it wasn’t too hard to take them out and get their guns. I guess the guards from your floor were coming after you or Katniss, because they started shooting at us in the stairwell when we were coming back up. That’s when Katniss got shot. I picked off 3 or 4, but there were a couple of guys who got away—I guess they took cover back in the apartment. We made it up a couple flights of stairs before Katniss started feeling woozy. I threw her over my shoulder and she passed out before we got here.”

The more I learn about the situation, the more I feel that Plutarch’s name is written all over this. “I think we’re still in the game.”

“What do you mean?” Effie and Peeta ask at the same time.

“The Avoxes have to be conspiring with someone. If it was someone from the resistance, don’t you think they’d be here by now? Helping to take control of the situation? Plutarch would be frothing at the mouth to get power back—even if it’s just the generator—so that his cameras would be filming us and there’s no way it’d be out this long when every building around us still has power. And Katniss’ wound…it’s not a wound meant to kill. It was perfectly aimed. Everything that’s happening is deliberately planned.”

“But why?” Peeta asks. “A game within a game? Making us think we’re winning when in all reality we’re probably right where they want us.”

“Haymitch is right.” Katniss’ hollow voice startles us all and our heads all whip around to look at her face. Her eyes are open and I can see the glistening trails of tears even in the darkness. “They’re calling us to the cornucopia.”

I brush loose strands of hair away from her face as I lean down to look at her. She looks ridiculous as an Avox and I fight the urge to wipe the ugly makeup off of her face. “Getting shot wasn’t part of the plan, sweetheart.” I tease lightly.

“Change of plans.” She tries to joke back, but fresh tears fall. “Haymitch…It all makes sense now. This is the cornucopia… this is where I’m supposed to kill one of you.”

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TBC
“It doesn’t make any sense.” Peeta argues. “They can’t anticipate what we’re going to do. We’ve killed people, you were shot, Haymitch! Look what they did to him!”

“They’re adapting.” Haymitch tells Peeta, trying to hold me down as I fight him to sit up. “They ‘roughed’ me up to get to Katniss. The guards are expendible—in Plutarch’s mind. And I told you…Katniss wouldn’t have died from her wound unless whoever shot her missed and hit an artery.”

I finally win the battle and sit up, but I hold onto Haymitch’s hand. He looks pale and ragged underneath all the bruises and I can see how shallow he’s breathing. “We need to tape up your ribs. I’ve seen my mother do it before.”

“This is the best medical supplies we have.” Haymitch tells me, pointing to the pile of rags, sheets and towels. “Don’t worry about me, sweetheart. I’ll live.”

I grimace at his choice of words and see the look of regret as he realizes how poorly timed they were. “Then at least lie down.” He doesn’t argue with me there and Peeta helps me get Haymitch onto the couch, Effie stuffing a pillow under his head.

“Effie,” he says, sounding tired. “My clothes must still be in my room, get Katniss one of my shirts. A button up would probably be better than something she has to lift her arm for.”

We watch Effie hurry off in the dark, and the tension suddenly mounts—we’ve always tried to keep Effie out of loop when it came to bad news. I guess some things don’t change. I speak first. “What do we do? Call Plutarch out? Tell him we know how the game works?”

“Nah, if we do that, he’s likely to take us by surprise and I really don’t need any more surprises right now.”

“What if we just don’t play?” Peeta offers. “Like Katniss and I did with the nightlock.”

“What? Like a murder-suicide pact.” Haymitch asks.

“More like we wait them out.” Peeta tells him.

“We wouldn’t be waiting long. Plutarch isn’t patient. He’ll find some way to move things along.”

Peeta and Haymitch go back and forth and I simply listen, watching them. Peeta is leaning over the back of the couch. He’s a little disheveled and sweaty, but he looks like the Peeta I remember—the Peeta before the hijacking. If he holds any sort of grudge against Haymitch, he’s hiding it well. I want so badly for Peeta to find happiness, but I know now that he and I would never be truly happy together. I love Peeta, but only as a friend now.

My eyes shift down to Haymitch as I sit next to him on the edge of the couch. Our hands are still
clasped together and I see his other hand clutching his ribs. When I’d told him to move up the flight of stairs, I had been thinking his guards would come after me, thinking we’d gone down the stairwell. I had hoped they wouldn’t think to look for anyone on any floors above that. I hadn’t expected that Haymitch would make it all the way to the penthouse, all the way back to get Effie. I know he did it for me, risking his own health and safety to carry out my plan and I feel my heart swell with love for him. To know that they did this to him because of me burns me up with anger, but what hurts more is knowing that Haymitch probably didn’t fight back because he didn’t want to make it any worse on me.

Effie returns with one of Haymitch’s shirt, chastising him on how he folds—“They’re all wrinkled, Haymitch.”—and helps me slip it on. I see Haymitch’s eyes shift up to Effie with a scornful look on his face, knowing he’s about to make some snippy comment, but I squeeze his hand again to stop him.

“We’re not waiting.” I finally announce. Effie stops as she’s buttoning the shirt down my front. “I’ve had enough of this. It’s time to end it.”

Almost as if Plutarch was waiting for the most dramatic moment possible, the lights kick on. The four of us blink and squint against the sudden light, and I shield my eyes as I look around the room, expecting him to be there. Peeta is looking at me with an unreadable expression.

“So you’ve chosen then.” It’s not a question.

I look at him sadly. “Yes.”

He nods as if he knows what my choice is and pushes off the couch. He directs his next words to whoever is listening. “Got enough footage for tonight? Think we could have one night without any surprises so we can get some sleep?”

I hear the defeat in his voice and it breaks my heart.

In answer to Peeta’s question, the elevator doors ding and several medics come into the common room. As they swarm Haymitch and I, Peeta leaves the room, moving off towards the bedrooms. I want to call to him, but I feel like my stomach is in my throat and all I can do is swallow compulsively as tears leak from my eyes.

Effie hovers nearby, obviously feeling lost and upset by everything that’s happened. As the medics work to patch me up, I watch them work on Haymitch. He’s grimacing, sitting up as they make sure his ribs are in place before they run some sort of infrared gadget over him. He almost sighs pleasantly and I realize they must have just healed the broken bones. They work on his nose next, setting the bone as he growls in pain, then heal it. They use another tool to heal the cuts, and another that seems to buff out some of his bruises. He’s still beat up, but he doesn’t look like death warmed over anymore. They continue to work on him as I’m given the all clear, and I meet his eyes.

He gives a slight flick of his head, indicating the bedrooms and silently telling me I should go to Peeta.

‘Thank you.’ I mouth the words and he gives me a wink. As I head towards Peeta’s room, I hear Haymitch giving Effie a hard time to help cheer her up a little. Despite everything, it makes me laugh.

Peeta is showered and in pajamas when I enter his room, but he’s sitting by the window rather than laying in bed. I move to sit beside him, daring to move in as close as he’ll let me and lean my head on his shoulder. He wraps his arm around my shoulder and we sit quietly for a long time.

“It’s never going to end, is it?” He asks as we look out over the city.
“No…Not while the Gamemakers still exist. Somehow it wouldn’t surprise me if Paylor has struck some kind of bargain with Plutarch. What better what to punish criminals and traitors than to force them to play the Games over and over again?”

“You’re not a traitor, Katniss.”

“I’m the Mockingjay, Peeta… I doubt there’s any higher form of rebellion than that.”

We lapse into another silence before Peeta speaks again. “If you and Haymitch hadn’t… done whatever…and if the wedding had been real, would you have married me?”

“Yes.” My voice sounds thick. I don’t want to talk about this, but I know we have to. Soon there won’t be any chance to. “If Haymitch had gotten us both out of the arena, I think things would have been very different for you and I. That’s my fault. I left you there with Finnick and Beetee.”

“You told me you wanted to leave the others. I should have listened to you. You’ve been saving my ass for too long, Katniss. I’m not your responsibility anymore.”

I sigh in annoyance. “What is it with you guys? Haymitch doesn’t want to be my liability, you don’t want to be my responsibility. Can’t either of you just accept that I love you? That I care for you?”

“Don’t do that.” Peeta says sullenly.

“What?”

“Tell me you still love me.”

“Why not? It’s true. Maybe it’s not that kind of love anymore, but I do love you, Peeta.”

“The way you love Gale.” Resignation.

“Why can’t that be enough?”

“I guess it won’t matter for much longer.” He drops his arm and gets up. “I’m tired, Katniss.”

It’s a dismissal and I feel the tears running down my face. There’s nothing else to say, nothing Peeta wants to hear from me, so I have no choice but to leave his room. I can hear Effie and Haymitch talking in the common room in quiet voices. The medics must have left. As much as I want to see Haymitch, I need to deal with Peeta first.

I go to my room and close the door, then head straight for the bathroom. The face of an Avox stares back at me in the mirror and I pull the faux eyebrows off angrily, nearly ripping out my own eyebrows in the process. I wet a hand towel and scrub at the white makeup and the red lips until enough of it is off that I look a little more like myself. My hair is still died with the red gel, so I turn on the shower as hot as I can stand it, then climb under, letting the hot water wash everything down the drain with the tears I cry for Peeta.

By the time I pull myself together, shampoo my hair, and wash my body, I feel drained. I climb out and wrap myself in a fluffy towel, grabbing my comb and raking it through my hair before I brush my teeth. I hear a soft knock on the bedroom door and immediately know it’s Haymitch. I spit, rinse, spit again, then move to open the door.

His hair is damp, and he’s wearing a pair of sleep pants and a t-shirt. He looks whole again, except for the sadness in his eyes. He eyes the towel I’m wearing for just a moment before he speaks. “I just wanted to see if you were okay.”
“Pretty far from it, I think.” I reach out and take his hand, gently pulling him into my room. I don’t have to ask him for what I want. He pushes the door closed behind him and then wraps his arms around me as he kisses me. Tender at first, then with such urgency that neither of us can seem to get enough. I’m aware of the cameras, but my need is far greater than any sense of propriety I might have had.

I drop the towel and pull Haymitch to the bed, our lips still locked together. He’s working his pants off, letting gravity do most of the work and kicking them off his ankles. I break the kiss long enough to pull his shirt off, and then we’re falling into bed. Our lovemaking is frantic and beautiful and fierce and wonderful and I just want to stay in this moment with him forever.

He holds me in the afterglow, stroking my hair, caressing my skin, and laying soft kisses along my brow. We don’t speak for a long time—with too much to say and no way to say it all, it’s hard to say anything. Haymitch shifts in the bed until we’re both laying on our sides, gazing into each other’s eyes.

“I wish I could hear your thoughts.” He says softly. “To know what you’ve decided so that I can talk you out of it.”

“Why would you try to talk me out of it if you don’t even know what ‘it’ is?”

“Because I know how you think, sweetheart. You’re still trying to figure out a way to save Peeta and me both.”

“You still think I should save Peeta.”

Haymitch hesitates for a long moment, breaking out eye contact. I can read the shame and guilt on his face and it makes me curious as he quietly answers. “No.”

I wait for him to explain, knowing he will when the right words come to him.

“You and I know what it’s like to lose everything, Katniss. I died that day I lost my family and Mica. I watched you die the day you lost Prim. Peeta’s lost his parents, I know, but…it’s not the same as what we’ve been through.”

Cruel as it is to compare our losses to Peeta’s in such a way, I know that Haymitch is right and I understand what he isn’t saying. Haymitch and I need each other in a way Peeta will never understand. Maybe that’s the glue in this relationship, the thing that holds us together even when all we want to do is rip each other apart.

I crush Haymitch’s lips under mine, rolling him onto his back and moving to straddle his lap. I can’t tell Haymitch what my decision is, but I want to try and make it up to him now and hope that when the time comes, he will forgive me and know that I loved him so much.

Our bodies join and our hands lock together as I rock my hips against him. Whether Haymitch realizes what I’ve chosen to do or not, he doesn’t say. He simply pulls me down until his lips are near my ear.

“I love you, Katniss.”

The words hold so much meaning that I can’t miss the unspoken goodbye in them, but—Haymitch being Haymitch—he finds a way to spoil the mood with a cutting remark.

“But don’t do anything stupid, sweetheart.”
TBC
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Haymitch's POV

As seems to always happen when I sleep with Katniss, I don’t dream. Awareness begins to creep into me slowly and I feel no hurry to leave this bed. I reach over for her, wanting to pull her closer just for a while longer, but find the bed empty and cold next to me. My eyes fly open to confirm that she’s not there, her name automatically on my lips.

“Katniss?”

“She’s not here.”

I startle at the closeness of the voice, flipping over to see Effie perched on the edge of the bed. “Gee, sweetheart, what are you trying to do, give me a damn heart attack?”

“I’m sorry.” She said tremulously, looking somewhat sheepish behind her pink eye shadow.

Then her words sink in. “What do you mean Katniss isn’t here? Where is she?”

Effie bites her lip, looking close to tears and I sit up, reaching my hand out to her. “Oh, Haymitch…”

Tears spring from her eyes as she begins to break down and I have no choice but to gather her in my arms and let her have her cry. Her obnoxious wig is crunched against my face as she weeps against my shoulder and I sigh into the light pink curls, trying to quell my annoyance. I find myself thinking about how ridiculous Effie’s style is when I remember I don’t care and that there are much more important matters at hand.

“Where is Katniss, Effie?” I ask again.

“They came early.” She sobs.

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“Peacekeepers, I think. Guards anyways. They weren’t dressed like Peacekeepers, but they said Plutarch had arranged an interview for Katniss with Caesar. I think they intend to air it before the ceremony.”

“Of course they do.” I grumble. “Did Katniss say anything to you when they took her?”

“No.” Effie’s tears have finally stopped and she’s dabbing at her eyes to a corner of the sheet.

I quietly take all of this in, wondering how it was that I never woke up through all of this. I know I’m a heavy sleeper, but I’m not that out of it when I sleep. I let out a heavy breath. I had fallen asleep before Katniss last night. Ten to one says that after I was out, Katniss slipped out of bed and probably didn’t sleep. Not that I really blame her, but I would have stayed up with her if I’d have known…
“What’s going to happen, Haymitch?” Effie breaks my thoughts and I know she’s referring to the ceremony.

“I don’t know.” I try to think of every scenario I can: Katniss killing Peeta; Katniss killing me; Katniss killing Plutarch; Katniss killing Caesar during the interview; the rebel alliance swooping in at the last minute; Paylor stepping in to stop the madness. Somehow I don’t see any of these things happening and I realize I truly don’t know what to expect. “I don’t know…”

Effie starts sobbing again. “I just want to go home. What did I do to deserve this?”

“It’s not like you’re the one on the chopping block, sweetheart.” I can’t keep the edge out of my voice. While I agree that Effie shouldn’t be a part of this, I can’t help but feel slighted by her blubbering. “After today, when all is said and done, you get to go home to your stupid Capitol apartment; to your pathetic, naïve little life, but one of us won’t be so lucky. In fact, none of us will be so lucky because we’ll all have to live—or die—with Katniss’ choice. But not you. So, stop crying, Effie, because I can’t feel sorry for you right now.”

Two blue eyes rimmed with baby pink blink slowly at me as if it suddenly dawns on her that she’s being selfish. “I…Haymitch, I’m—“

“Don’t apologize.” I cut her off. “Just try to remember what’s really going to happen here today.”

Her eyes close, releasing two final tears.

“Now, if you don’t mind…I’d like to get dressed.”

I see another realization dawn in Effie’s eyes and she her cheeks tinge with pink under her heavy application of white powder. “Oh…” Her eyes shift to where the sheet covers me at the waist. “Yes…of course.” She gets to her feet, trying to avoid looking at me as she gracefully tries to exit the room.

I don’t give myself time to wallow in the misery of how this day will end, and simply get up. I return to my room for a shower, and even knock down my whiskers a little just to buy more time before I have to face Peeta without Katniss as a buffer between us. He and I have never had much of a problem with each other, but I can’t imagine he’s too keen on me stealing Katniss away from him, and I don’t want to spend what little time either of us has left with his resentment hanging over my head.

As I dress, I keep thinking back to last night. I feel I know Katniss well enough to know that no matter what I’ve said, she’s still going to do something stupid, but I haven’t yet figure out what stunt she may try to pull. I do know, though, that if Katniss thinks she can save both of us, she’s still going to try. No matter how many steps ahead Plutarch may be.

By the time I make it out to the living room, they’re airing last night’s escape attempt, but I don’t bother watching. Peeta and Effie are both sitting at the table, pushing food around their bowls and I join them, managing only a few bites before I start poking at my own breakfast.

“Do you think people are rooting for us to make it out?” Peeta asks suddenly.

“Some, I’m sure. But, like any of the Games, most people probably want to see a good death.”

I see Peeta’s jaw clench and he drops his spoon against his bowl, pinning me with a near-murderous scowl. “I’m sure they won’t be disappointed.”

I can hear the threat in the words and I gently lay my own spoon down as I look at him with a neutral expression. “Go on. Say what you want to say.”
“How long have you been fucking Katniss?” The words make Effie gasp and she drops her own spoon and covers her ears.

“How long have you been fucking Katniss?” She hisses in reprimand.

“Not as long as you think.” I reply in a non-answer.

“How long, Haymitch? Were you two screwing around while I was imprisoned? While they tortured me? Killed everyone around me? Fed me memories warped my brain?”

“No.”

“Yeah right.” He scoffs.

“Look, I know you feel royally fucked over, but we didn’t plan on any of this, okay? I wasn’t sitting around thinking, ‘Gee, how can I mess up Peeta’s life today?’ She needed someone and you weren’t there.”

“So you thought you’d just step in.”

“She came to me!”

“And it never occurred to you to say ‘no?’” He gives a derisive laugh. “No, of course not. Why would it? Beautiful, young girl, throwing herself at you. Bet you’ve never had anything like that, have you? She must have had no one else if she went to you.”

I know I could throw everything back in his own face, brag about how I deflowered Katniss, about how she was carrying my child, how she loved me, but I don’t see the point. One of us is going to die today and I’d rather not have any more regrets on my conscience.

“Look, Peeta. You can believe what you want to believe, but I never intended for any of this to happen. Am I sorry it has? Not really. I’m sorry you were hurt by it, but I’m not sorry for the way I feel for Katniss.”

“I just can’t wrap my mind around it.” He says, almost defeated. “You two hate each other. Was that just an act for my benefit?”

“No…but I never hated her. Thoroughly disliked her, yes. Infuriated by her, oh yeah. Frustrated as hell by her, you betcha. But as intensely as I feel all of that for her, I feel just as strongly on the other end of the spectrum.”

Peeta falls quiet for a few minutes, observing me with unreadable eyes as he mulls everything over. “You know she’s going to save you, don’t you?”

I can’t help but have my doubts. “Don’t put all your chips down on me, Lover Boy. Katniss may think she loves me, but even that can’t hold a candle to you.”

The challenging glint is back in his eye. “Then may the best man win.”

I can only swallow around the tightness in my throat. If Katniss makes her choice based on who the better man is, then Peeta win will by a long shot. I can’t meet his eyes as I speak around the lump still strangling me. “Do me a favor…don’t let her turn into me.”

Our conversation is interrupted by the musical intro that always precedes an appearance by Caesar Flickerman. All three of our gazes turn towards the screen in the common room and we find ourselves almost floating over the couch as if entranced by the images flashing across the screen.
Caesar is his usual, all-smiling self. His electric blue hair coiffed back into a stupid looking stub of ponytail at the base of his neck. His blue suit looks like it’s been rolled in diamond dust as it sparkles and gleams under the stage lights.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen!!” He exclaims. A live audience goes wild and the cameras pan around the studio to show a full house—all Capitol residents—in attendance. “We first met Katniss Everdeen after she volunteered as Tribute in the 74th Hunger Games. Enamored by her sacrifice in place of her sister—may she rest in peace—we cheered for her victory as the Girl on Fire! We fell in love with the romance between her and Peeta Mellark. Some of us may have even quietly supported her during the rebellion. But now, on the brink of her wedding to Peeta—a wedding we have all anticipated, whether we love her, hate her, or envy her—we find that there has been more going on than anyone could have imagined!!”

Several people in the crowd ooh and ahh, some even catcalling. Caesar wiggles his eyebrows and grins into the camera wolfishly. “How I envy Haymitch Abernathy… Don’t you?” More catcalls and cheers.

“Live tonight, we will watch as Katniss finally decides the fate of her two loves, but now—ladies and gentlemen—a very special treat. In studio with us, right now, is none other than Katniss Everdeen, the Girl on Fire!!”

As Caesar throws his arm out towards the wing of the stage where Katniss would be entering, there’s a deafening explosion and a flash from the fireball that envelops the stage. The cameras crackle in and out of static as they start to short circuit, but the sound of the crowd screaming in panic leaves no doubt as to the chaos going on in the studio. The entire building shudders from the force of the explosion, and all three of us reach out to grasp something to steady ourselves as we gape at the screen, wondering what has just happened.

The focus on the camera swims in and out as it tries to automatically center on the fire eating away the heavy curtains on the stage, and Caesar’s flaming body lying motionless on the floor, his dead eyes opened in horror as the flames lick away his flesh.

Out of the smoldering flames, steps an imposing figure and the camera focuses in on the hard, cold gaze in Katniss’ eyes. She’s wearing her Mockingjay armor and holding her special bow, a quiver of arrows visible over her shoulder, one explosive arrow notched onto the bowstring. My mouth runs dry at the sight of her. She’s beautiful, but deadly.

I can see Peeta’s mouth hanging open next to me, as shocked at this turn in events as I am and I glance quickly at Effie, not wanting to miss a single second of what’s being broadcast.

“Effie…what’d you say those guards looked like?”

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TBC
Chapter 13

Katniss' POV

The crowd is a blur of color as they trample each other trying to get to the exits. Their petrified screams sound like justice; the smell of smoke and flame like victory.

*Didn’t see that coming, did you, Plutarch?* I scan the area for any sign of retaliation, the bow humming in my hands as it waits for me to take aim on my next target. Someone appears at my left, rifle in hand and I look over at Gale, narrowing my eyes in annoyance.

“Took you long enough.”

“Simmer down, Katnip, we had to try and outsmart a Gamemaker, after all.”

“Haymitch and the others—“

“Will be fine; we’ve already got a team on the way up.”

I look into the camera, not sure if the feed is still being broadcast. “See you soon.” I say to all of them, each one holding a different meaning in my heart.

I look back at Gale. “Let’s find him.”

“Intelligence says that he’s fled the Training Center. We had scouts planted in the control room after the blackout and there’s been no communication from him.” Gale tells me as we leave the burning stage, ignoring the frantic crowd, still scrambling out the exits. “Paylor has Peacekeepers sweeping the Capitol for him, but if he was smart, he bailed.”

“Then we’ll just sweep the districts and the outlying country.” I say, my mind set on revenge. “He won’t last more than a week.”

My body goes on autopilot as my mind tries to assimilate the last 12 hours into reality. Truth: The rebels were behind the blackout, using that time to infiltrate the training center in strategic areas. Truth: Those who had infiltrated the command center, gained complete control of the building. Their signal to us that they had control was the lights being turned back on and the medical team being dispatched to heal Haymitch and myself. The interview with Caesar had been arranged by Plutarch, and the rebels had decided to keep it on schedule to try and flush Plutarch out of wherever he’d holed up when he realized he’d lost control of the Game. I wasn’t sure how I felt about Caesar being a pawn, but he was as willing as everyone else to watch Peeta or Haymitch die for pure entertainment, so I let myself remain apathetic to him.

When the guards had taken me from the apartment this morning, I hadn’t fought them, hadn’t considered trying to escape them. I was simply ready for it all to be over. Imagine my surprise when the elevator doors opened on the lower level and Gale was standing there waiting for me. I was so overcome with emotion that I hugged him and slugged him at the same time. As they suited me up in my Mockingjay armor, Gale had quickly filled me on how they had been planning a rescue attempt since Plutarch’s first propos.
Apparently, Plutarch had gone rogue. None of his new shows had gotten the same response as the Hunger Games had gotten and he’d felt cheated out of his fame and glory. He had taken us hostage in the Training Center, letting no one in or out and hijacking the airwaves to broadcast the show the same way Beetee had during the rebellion. No one was certain if Plutarch intended for any of us to survive, but one thing was sure…this show had just been cancelled.

“Yeah?” I hear Gale next to me and look over to see him pressing an earpiece more firmly into his ear. “Got it. We’ll head that way.”

“What way?” I ask anxiously, hoping they’ve cornered Plutarch and are waiting for me to arrive on the scene so I can put an arrow straight through his heart. Or maybe his eye. Or his head. My mind flashes through all the possibilities before Gale can even answer.

“Come on, I’ve got a surprise for you. I think you’ll like it.”

We head down to the cafeteria, my heart racing in my chest. When Gale pushes open the door, I feel all the tension melt out of my body. Haymitch, Peeta and Effie are all here. Last night, after Haymitch had fallen asleep, I had quietly said goodbye to him, knowing I wouldn’t see him—or any of them—again.

A strangled sob escapes my lips as my eyes dart between the three of them. Effie looks like she’s in shock, sitting in a chair and barely registering my presence. But Haymitch and Peeta are both looking at me anxiously, trying to figure out who I’ll run to first. Somewhere in my amped up brain, I realize that this moment is just as emotionally charged for them as it would be if I were making my final decision about who lives and who dies. Whoever I run to first, they’ll both know that’s who I would have saved. I force myself to step towards them slowly, coming to stand a few feet away, directly in the middle of both of them, then hold a hand out to both of them.

I see the relief that washes over Peeta’s face, but Haymitch’s expression remains impassive as they both take my hand and allow me to pull them into a group hug. Peeta tucks his head down against my shoulder, one arm going around my waist. Haymitch, however, doesn’t release my hand, and so he just stands awkwardly against me as I try to hug him.

I know I can’t talk to both of them at the same time in order to say what’s really on my mind, so I decide to skip the sentimentality and go straight to filling them in on everything. Peeta looks like a man who’s been given a death pardon as he shakes the hands of the men and women in the room with us, clapping Gale on the shoulder like a long lost brother. Haymitch, however, hasn’t moved.

With Peeta and Gale now talking about the strategy, I reach for Haymitch’s hand, but he pulls it away.

“I need to know,” he says softly. “Who was it going to be, sweetheart?”

“Both of you.” I tell him.

He fights a smirk. “How’d I know…” Haymitch looks towards Peeta and Gale, taking a deep breath before he looks back at me. “And how were you going to manage that?”

When I reach out again, he lets me take his hand, let’s me wrap my arms around him, let’s me kiss him as deeply as I possibly can. When I pull back, he slowly opens his eyes to look at me, gently brushing a stray lock of hair from my face and tucking it behind my ear. My senses tell me that all eyes have turned to us, but I don’t care.

“That doesn’t answer my question.” He teases lightly.
“I know.” I say, laying my hand over his heart. “But you just have to trust that I would have saved both of you.”

“By killing yourself.” It’s not a question, and I know he knows that had been my plan in the end.

“If that’s what it took.”

Haymitch wraps me in an embrace so tight that I can feel his muscles quivering under the strain. His lips press against my ear and I hear the strangled sound of his voice whisper, “I thought I told you not to do anything stupid.”

I pull back to look at him. “Guess it’s a good thing I didn’t get the chance.”

He looks like he wants to kiss me, but he’s too aware of our audience and he settles for kissing the top of my head before he releases me. “Go plan with Bread Boy* over there. I’ll see about returning Effie to the land of the living.”

“Is she okay?”

“In shock.” He tells me. “This has all been…”

“A fucking nightmare?” I finish when he fails to find a word. Haymitch tosses his head back with a laugh straight from his belly, and this time he does pull me in to kiss my lips.

“Absolutely, sweetheart. A fucking nightmare.”

He lets me go and I watch him move to where Effie has remained unaffected by everything around her. Haymitch squats in front of her, taking her hands and I see Effie’s eyes shift to his, but they still look a million miles away, vacant like they were after they released her from prison.

“Katniss—” Peeta calls out to me and I break my gaze away and turn to move over to where a group has gathered around one of the tables. I sit between Peeta and Gale as the plans start to weave into something workable now that we’ve taken over the training center and ended the Game.

“Paylor knows that you won’t stop hunting Plutarch, and—frankly—she’s going to need all hands on deck to find him.” Gale tells me. “We have orders to bring him in alive, but no one’s going to hold back if he ‘resists.’”

I understand the unspoken suggestion. If, say, in the heat of battle, I “accidentally” send an arrow into Plutarch and he dies from the wound…no one would protest it. “Maybe I’ll just shoot him in the knee and make him walk to the President’s mansion.” I offer. “He doesn’t deserve a quick death.”

As we discuss strategy and try to decide where Plutarch would be holing himself up, Haymitch wanders over and leans against the edge of the table, listening. There’s talk about Plutarch going back to 13, going to 2, going to 12, but Haymitch is the one to shut these ideas down.

“Plutarch is a creature of habit. He’ll be where the action is at, and that action is going to be wherever Katniss is. If he’s looking for revenge, he’s going to wait for the prime moment.”

“Then he’s still in the Capitol.”

“No.” I say, meeting Haymitch’s gaze. “He’s still in the building.”

Everyone falls silent and all eyes turn to me. Gale clears his throat. “Katniss, we searched every
inch of this building…there was no sign of him.”

“I guarantee you, you haven’t.” Haymitch says. He tells someone to bring over a blueprint of the building the rebels have been working on, then takes a pen from someone and begins to make new lines on the paper, adding invisible rooms and strange narrow passageways.

“Where were you two days ago?” Gale mutters unthinkingly.

“Oh, you know… Hanging around, getting my ribs broken, that sort of thing.” Haymitch tosses back, his voice full of sarcasm, before quipping, “Where were you?”

Gale clears his throat again and looks back at the blueprints and I roll my eyes, knowing that was his lame apology to Haymitch. As much as I want to help track Plutarch and bring an end to all of this, I’m exhausted. The others are talking around me, making a strategy of who’s going to take which floor to search the new areas Haymitch has drawn out for them. Peeta’s hand brushes against my leg and I look over at him. He’s giving me that wonderful little half-smile I’ve missed so much and I can’t help but smile back.

“Go and sleep, Katniss. Everyone knows to take him alive and leave him to you. We can take it from here.”

I’m tired enough that I don’t argue and no one says anything as I push back from the table, moving over to a bench along the wall and laying down. I watch the group planning, asking Haymitch where he thinks Plutarch would most likely be. Haymitch is completely engaged in the conversation, pointing out several places he feels are most likely based on well he knows the man from their planning together during the rebellion. I vaguely remember seeing this side of Haymitch during the rebellion when we were back in 13, but I had been so angry with him then that I had always tried to tune him out. I realize just how brilliant and cunning Haymitch is. Peeta was right, Haymitch is the strategist, and I’m certain that most of what we accomplished in the war was because of him.

My eyes drift around the room, to the various faces of the men and women who helped in our rescue and who continue to plan to bring the madman to justice. There are only three people not gathered around the table. Myself, Effie and someone else who is milling around, his back halfway turned to me. Something about him seems oddly familiar, but I dismiss it. Surely I know him from the resistance—I know almost everyone here from our rebel troops.

As my eyes start to drift close, a flash of silver catches the light and I refocus on the man, seeing the knife in his hand for the first time. He’s moving towards Effie—unguarded, unaware, unarmed Effie.

“EFFIE!” I shriek, jerking to my feet and reaching for my bow as Plutarch rushes at Effie, the knife slashing. It takes only a few seconds to find the arrow, load it, and release, but I can see the red slash along Effie’s throat.

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TBC

Additional note: Borrowed the idea to use the nickname Bread Boy from LankySundown because the way Haymitch used it in her fic “Screams” was just brilliant. Hope you don’t mind Lanks. I offer free, shameless plugs in payment of my mooching.
The train is roaring through the countryside at over 200 mph, but the amber liquid in my glass barely even ripples in response. I feel so dead inside, that I haven’t even touched my drink since I poured it and set it beside me on the side table. Katniss is to my right, a small length of rope in her hands as she ties and unties various knots silently. The screen in front of us is playing a feature on the Life and Times of Caesar Flickerman. We both scoff as the voiceover quips, “A man who died so young.”

Katniss reaches for the remote and flicks the off button before she returns to her rope. It’s been two days since she’s spoken to anyone, so I fully expect her to keep up the mute routine as I slouch down in the chair and close my eyes. “Do you think she’ll be okay?”

My eyes open again, but I stare at my fingers laced over my stomach as I consider the question. There’s no doubt in my mind she means Effie. “I hope so.” Is the only answer I have.

It had all seemed to happen so fast. Katniss’ shrill cry had startled all of us, and my eyes flashed first to her before I tracked what she’s looking at. By the time I realized what had happened, Plutarch was dead on the floor and Effie was clutching at the gaping wound to her throat. The room seemed to explode with frantic activity then as everyone started rushing to Effie at the same time.

Katniss and I had reached her first, but it was me who had pulled Effie’s hand off her neck and applied pressure with my own hand. Peeta had gone for help, but everyone else was just standing over us—dazed.

“Check the body!” I bark out an order to no one in particular. “Make sure that son of a bitch is dead.”

*Effie gasps in my arms, struggling for breath and trying to wriggle free of my grip, but I wrap my other arm tightly around her. “Don’t move, sweetheart, don’t move!”*

It had taken medics several hours to repair the damage to Effie’s windpipe and replenish her blood, but they had managed to save her. However, the psychological damage of everything Effie had endured wasn’t going to be so easily fixed. She had gone into a state of complete catatonia—refusing to speak, refusing to eat, and refusing to respond to any type of external stimuli. After several days, the doctors had had no choice but to admit her to the ward for people with mental instabilities. There had been nothing more for Katniss and me to do at that point, and so we had said our goodbye’s to an unresponsive Effie, wishing her the best and making vague promises to see her soon when she was better.

With Plutarch dead, Paylor had decided to hold trials for every person involved in the production of our Game, but had felt no need for Peeta, Katniss or me to be present for the hearings, unless we simply wanted to be. Katniss and I both agreed that we just wanted to go home, but Peeta had wanted to stay.
“Listen,” he had told us—well, more to Katniss than me, really. “I think I want to stick around for the hearings, and…maybe hang with Gale for a while. See what’s out there besides bread.”

Though he wasn’t directly saying it, I knew that Peeta was distancing himself from Katniss. Her choosing to be with me had been too much for him. While he was still—mostly—friendly with both of us, I knew that it would be a long while before either of us heard from Peeta Mellark again.

“How do you still want to go home?” I had asked, giving her one last chance to change her mind and be with Peeta.

Katniss had searched my eyes, considering the offering for a long minute before she whispered, “Yes.”

That had been the last word she had spoken until now.

Katniss puts down her rope for the first time since she woke up this morning and looks at me. “Why do you think he did it? Attacked Effie? If he’d waited five minutes until I’d fallen asleep, he could have just as easily slit my throat.”

“I’ve wondered the same thing.” I say gently. “But Effie was more or less alone where she was sitting. We let our guard down too long, and stopped paying attention to our surroundings. If he couldn’t get to you, and he couldn’t get to me or Peeta, then he had to go for the next available kill. She was an easy target, and he probably thought if he acted casually, no one would pay attention to him and he could kill her and get out and wait for the next opportunity to get one of us.”

“I keep wondering what’s going to be next. It seems like as soon as one is gone, someone else steps in to take over. Coin for Snow, Plutarch for Coin.”

I rise from my chair and slide into hers. The chair isn’t roomy, but we make up for it by nestling in close to each other. “I think for once, sweetheart, neither of us has to worry about that. Which is good, because we have enough on our plate right now.”

Katniss looks at me curiously, trying to discern my meaning, and I place my hand gently on her abdomen. I see a shift in her face until a mixture of uncertainty and fear are reflected there. “Are we ready for this, Haymitch?”

“Probably not.” I answer honestly. “But the way I see it, we have just under 9 months to get ready.”

The uncertainty remains in Katniss’ eyes as she covers my hand with hers. “Katniss.” I wait until she looks at me again. “This is the last time I’m going to give you the chance to walk away from me. If you don’t want to be with me—“

“Haymitch.” Katniss cuts me off and I wait for her to tell me I’m right and that she wants to go back to Peeta, but she grips the front of my shirt instead and hauls me closer. “Stop trying to get out of this.”

“I—” I’m not able to finish the though as Katniss pulls me into a searing kiss. Her tongue sweeps across my lower lip and I automatically grant her access to my mouth, moaning as my body comes alive at her forcefulness. Katniss moves to straddle my lap, and we’re once again where we always end up.

“I need you.” Katniss whispers, though we’re alone, her hips rolling against mine. She looks
meaningfully into my eyes, her hands on my face. “I want you, Haymitch.”

I don’t need any further convincing and I drag her back down to my lips. We kiss like it’s going out of style, and Katniss is clawing at my shirt as if she plans to rip it off of me and I can’t help but laugh. “Easy, sweetheart. I happen to like this shirt and would prefer it not become a casualty of your raging desire for me.”

Katniss smirks mischievously but releases my shirt. “Well, I guess if your clothes mean more to you than I do, I’ll just go take a nice, hot shower and take care of myself.”

The image that assaults my mind is so delightfully vivid that it takes me half a minute to realize Katniss has slipped from my lap and is passing through the door to the next car, headed towards the room we’ve wordlessly decided to share on the way back to District 12. I’m on my feet before the door closes again, racing after her.

Katniss is laughing, running through the car as I chase her, but she gets stalled at the next door when the latch catches and I overtake her, pinning her up against the door as my mouth crashes down on hers. We’re both slightly breathless when we pull back, and the air is thick with our shared arousal. I smirk at Katniss, then bend down and wrap my arms around her thighs, lifting her up over my shoulder.

She squeals out an indignant “Haymitch!” but doesn’t struggle against me as I carry her the rest of the way to our room. When I throw her down on the bed, she screams at first, but then laughs when she bounces off the soft mattress. “If that’s the way you intend to treat me, I very well may go back to Peeta.” She says, crossing her arms and trying to look offended.

I grab her ankles, dragging her to the edge of the bed again and place my hands on either side of her as I lean down so that we’re eye to eye. My vision is obscured by my hair, but I try and give her my most lethal look anyways. “It’s too late for that, sweetheart.”

Katniss shudders, reaching up to wrap her fingers around my head and pull me to her lips yet again. I grasp the hem of her shirt and tug it up over her head, forcing her to break the kiss. She looks at me longingly as she slides back on the bed, reaching back to unhook her bra before she slides it down her arms and tosses it aside.

Though seeing her undressed is nothing new, it takes my breath away and my fingers still as I try to unbutton my own shirt. I watch her run her hands over her breasts and down across her stomach before she starts to unfasten her pants. She makes quick work of shimmying them down her hips and off her legs, kicking them to the floor, leaving her in nothing but her panties. Katniss reclines back on her elbows as she watches me, the expression on her face as clear as if she was saying the words out loud: I’m waiting.

I give up on the buttons and pull the shirt over my head, struggling to get the still-buttoned cuffs off and trapping myself for several seconds. Katniss snickers as she watches me, but when I toss a glare at her, she merely arches her eyebrow at me and smirks. I rid myself of the rest of my clothing and Katniss holds her hand out to me in invitation. I let her pull me onto the bed and settle myself between her legs as my lips immediately seek out hers. Her fingers lightly glide up and down my back as I trail kisses along her jaw, down her throat and across her shoulder.

When her nails dig slightly into me and she arches her back a little under me, I know exactly what she wants, so I work my lips lower to capture her breast. I take my time kissing and licking and suckling each one of her tits, relishing in the way she sighs in pleasure, her fingers now running through my hair restlessly. As nice as it is, I can’t help but try to antagonize her by taking her wrists and pinning them to the bed, then taking the tip of my tongue and very lightly circling the peak of her nipple. I feel Katniss straining beneath me, trying to free her hands—mostly because she hates to be dominated, but also because I’m driving her insane.
“I am so going to kill you when you let me go.” She growls.

I challenge her to make good on her threat by releasing one of her wrists and sliding my hand up along her inner thigh inside. I work my fingers under the elastic and stroke along her slickened folds.

“O-ohh…” Her angry tune changes immediately and she spreads her legs even more as I find her clit. She’s still trying to wriggle her other wrist free, but I hold tight as I continue to tease her nipple and her clit. Her entire body starts to quiver beneath me and she’s using her free hand to pull her underwear to the side. “Haymitch…please…” She whines.

“Please what?” I ask, blowing a soft breath against her wet nipple and making it harden even more. She cries out, almost desperately.

“Fuck me!”

I graze her with my teeth. “No.”

“W-What?” She asks, lifting her head to look at me as if I’d just said the most heinous thing possible.

I bite back a grin. “I said no, sweetheart.”

“Why?”

I move back up her body until we’re nose to nose. Pinning her free hand back to the bed again. “Because I want you to fuck me.”

We’d only ever tried it once before with Katniss on top, but judging by the way she shivers beneath me, I can tell she remembers it well. I roll us over so that Katniss is now on top of me and the fire comes back in her eyes as she realizes she’s the one now in control and that I’m at her mercy.

She rubs herself against me, her panties damp against my erection as she grins down at me. “Too lazy to do any of the work yourself?”

“I just have a better view from down here.”

She lifts her hips and swings her leg off of me, rolling down her underwear and throwing them to the floor before she swings back over me and slowly encases me in her warmth. I groan and place my hands on her hips but Katniss smacks at them.

“Ah-ah-ah…no touching.”

“I thought you were complaining about my not doing anything a minute ago?”

“Just letting you enjoy the view.” She quips.

I drop my hands and place them behind my head so that I’m not tempted to break her rule, and watch as she moves herself up and down slowly, finding her rhythm. I know she finds it when her head falls back and she pushes down on my shoulders for leverage. Besides the fact that she feels fucking incredible, her breasts sway and bounce with the effort, only adding to my enjoyment.

Katniss quickly loses herself as she rides me with reckless abandon, giving over to the pleasure and trying to fulfill her need. She’s moaning and mewling, whimpering and crying, and slamming down on me so hard I feel like I’m going to explode before she can find her peak.
I know she’s completely lost in the moment, so I break her rule and slip my thumb between our bodies to find her clit, rubbing it furiously. I feel her inner walls seize around me and she screams my name as she starts to cum, milking me to my own orgasm. Our hips rock together as we ride out the waves of pleasure, and Katniss is still trembling slightly when she lowers her upper body against my chest. She buries her face in the crook of my neck, and I feel her lips press a soft kiss against my throat. I wrap my arms around her, holding her tight against me, still not quite able to wrap my mind around the fact that Katniss is choosing to be with me because she wants to be and not simply because she has no way else to cope.

Part of me still believes that Katniss will come to her senses—realize what a horrible person I am—and go back to Peeta, but the other part of me clings to the hope she has given me. The hope that maybe love isn’t a liability. Or if it is, maybe it’s worth all the damn heartache just to feel this.

“Katniss…”

“Hmm?” She’s basking in the afterglow, awake but completely sated.

I hold her a little tighter. “I love you.”

I feel her nestle a little closer. “I love you too.”

- 

TBC
Nine months is nowhere near long enough when you’re as unprepared for this kind of thing as Haymitch and I are. While I’m grateful that the rest of the world has butted out of my life and I’m not being filmed 24 hours a day, I feel like my own little world is still spinning out of control. There’s too much to figure out…and just not enough hours in the day.

During those first few weeks back in District 12, Haymitch and I avoided having any serious conversations involving the future, mostly because we had no idea where either of us stood on the issues and we were both too cowardly to say what we really wanted. We did, however, have an unspoken understanding that we were in this together. And not because we had to be, but because we wanted to be.

I spent most of my days hunting; trying to reclaim the peace and solitude I once found in my meadow and use the time to start dealing with everything that has happened over the last two years. I don’t know how much progress I really made at first, the thought of everything and everyone shut me down completely and I spent most of the time screaming and crying from the pain it caused. By the time I returned in the evenings—generally with no kills—I was mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted. Though I knew Haymitch was in tune with me enough to read me, he never pressed me to talk about it. Instead, he’d try and make me laugh with his biting, sarcastic humor. It almost always worked, and by the time we went to bed at night, I always felt better.

I don’t know what Haymitch did during the day, but I know he tried to find ways to occupy his time that didn’t involve drinking. Much of the time he wasn’t successful, but he was never as falling-down-drunk as he was when I’d first met him, so I had to give him some measure of credit for trying.

I remember the first time it really became clear to me that Haymitch was trying to find a sustainable way to provide for us since it wasn’t likely we would receive the same benefits that we had as Victors of the Hunger Games. I had slept in one morning, having been up most of the night with nausea from the pregnancy, and found Haymitch sitting next to me on the edge of the bed, grinning in a way that never bodes well from him.

“What?” I’d asked warily.

“There’s something I want to show you.” He paused, his eyes full of mirth. “If you can find it within yourself to get out of bed today.”

I had glared at him with no real malice, as I got up and let him lead me downstairs. I looked around at the unchanged living room. “Well?”

“It’s outside. Put your shoes on and close your eyes.”

I had grumbled to him about how I hated surprises, mostly just grouchy because I was still tired and not feeling 100%, but I humored him nonetheless. Haymitch led me outside and around to the
side of the house, being careful to guide me so that I didn’t run into anything or trip.

“Okay…open your eyes.” He sounded like he was about to spontaneously combust from his excitement and I couldn’t image what on earth would get him this giddy other than a good stiff drink. When I opened my eyes, I was faced with a pen full of geese.

“Geese? Haymitch…what the hell?”

“What’s wrong with geese?” He asked, looking injured by my perceived rejection of his flock. “They lay eggs, don’t they? We can sell the eggs. We can use the eggs. We can eat the eggs. Maybe it won’t make us rich enough to live in the Capitol, but it’ll be enough for our needs here.”

My eyes had filled with tears as I realized this was his way of trying to plan for our future—a future we still hadn’t really talked about. I remember the near heartbroken look on his face when I’d started crying.

“I’m sorry. It was a stupid idea. Who raises geese… I’ll sell them and think of something else, Katniss.”

“No…I’m not crying because I’m upset, you idiot. I’m crying because you’re wonderful and it’s brilliant and I love you.”

Haymitch rolled his eyes dramatically at me, but pulled me into a fierce hug, muttering “Women…” quietly and receiving a slug on the arm for it.

After that moment, we had started to slowly ease into discussions about the future. We decided that, since I pretty much stayed with Haymitch every night that we would officially move in together and I would let someone else move into my house. That wasn’t a difficult decision in any way, shape, or form, as I had no intention of ever living there again. I couldn’t. Not without Prim.

Haymitch had asked what I intended to do when the baby was born—if I would try to find some work or if I wanted to stay home. The thought of being stuck in the house was stifling and reminded me of being stuck underground in 13, but what could I do as far as a job? I could hunt, yes, but was I really any good at anything else? Haymitch had suggested that I really think about it, that he would support anything I decided I wanted to do or not do, and if all I wanted to do after the baby was born was tuck myself away in the woods and hunt, that I had better at least bring supper home because you could only cook eggs so many ways.

Then came the biggest decision of all.

“What are you going to call it?” Haymitch had asked, laying behind me and gently rubbing my abdomen to help calm my nausea.

“It’s a baby, Haymitch…not an ‘it.’” I’d bit back with a little more venom than was probably necessary.

“No? Really?” The sarcasm is there, indicating his annoyance at my snappy retort. “And I thought it was going to be a litter of kittens. Guess I should return the tiny saucer I bought for the milk.”

“Oh, shut up.” I grumbled as I put my hand over his and held it still, seriously thinking about his question. “If it’s a girl…Prim.”

“And if it’s a boy?” He had asked in a soft voice as he pressed a soft kiss against my shoulder.

“What was your brother’s name?”
I heard Haymitch swallow behind me, and when he spoke, his voice shook with emotion. “Lysander.”

“Then if it’s a boy, I want to name him Lysander.”

We hadn’t verbally said anything else for the rest of the night, but there was so much said in the way he had held me.

When it had gotten too hard for me to go to the woods to hunt, I spent most of the days watching the town slowly being rebuilt and talking with Greasy Sae and several other people from the Hob who had survived the fires and had come back to reclaim their homes. I always offered for Haymitch to come with me, but he had always waved me away and told me to get out of his hair. I hadn’t thought much of it, truth be told. I certainly wasn’t the kind of person who felt I needed to be around Haymitch every minute of every day to feel complete, and I knew he wasn’t the type to pine away whenever I wasn’t near. I knew he had his new flock to tend to, so it didn’t matter what else he did when I wasn’t there.

It was nearing sundown one evening when I’d left Greasy Sae’s with a dish of fresh stew for Haymitch. He was waiting on the porch for me, sitting on the steps while he worked a piece of wood with his knife. I had laughed as I looked at him—barefoot, shirtsleeves rolled up over his forearms, and wrinkled trousers: Classic Haymitch, the epitome of a complete slouch.

“Are you…whittling?”

His lips had curved up into a slight smirk as he’d looked passed the wood at me. “That depends.”

“Oh?”

“Whether or not it looks like what it’s supposed to.”

I looked hard at the piece in his hand, but had no idea what it was supposed to be. “What is it?”

He held it in his hand but it looked like an uneven lump.

“A goose.”

“I will…take your word for it.”

He looked at it critically for a minute. “Well…it will look like one when I finish.”

I smirked at him, bemused, for a long minute before he got to his feet and brushed wood chips from his pants. He held his hand out to me. “Come on, there’s something I want to show you.”

“What is it?”

“Just something I’ve been working on for a while.” When he closed the door behind me, he had told me to close my eyes.

“Damn it, Haymitch! I told you I hate surprises.”

“Relax, sweetheart, this one doesn’t involve wildlife this time.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes, but again I let him lead me—upstairs this time. When we stopped, I heard the door to his second bedroom creak open and he gently ushered me into the room with his hands on my shoulders.
His lips were right next to my ear when he whispered, “Open your eyes.”

The sight that greeted me was beyond my wildest dreams. It was a nursery. Everything looked so new and beautiful, except for the crib. It looked handcrafted. It was the first thing in the room that I touched, running my hand over the smooth surface.

“Do you like it?” He’d asked, still standing back to give me a chance to take it in.

“It’s beautiful…where did you get it?” I asked, referring to the crib.

“I made it.” He said, somewhat sheepishly. I’d thought of his lumpy goose and covered my mouth before I could laugh. “I told you, the end product would be better.”

“Haymitch…this is…amazing.” I looked at the mobile hanging above the crib, and pushed it with my finger watching it slowly spin.

“Your mother’s helped me with a lot of it.” He confessed. “I thought since we can’t really get a lot of things here, she could help pick out a few things that could be for a boy or a girl, and that way the baby doesn’t have to start with nothing like we did.”

His thoughtfulness and determination to give our child a better life than either of us had made me feel sick with love for him. Sometimes it’s so hard to reconcile that side of Haymitch with his caustic sarcasm, and I never know whether to laugh or cry in those moments. Something he’d told me long ago filtered into my mind: “You could live a hundred lifetimes and not deserve him, you know?”

Oh, Haymitch…how wrong you were. It’s you I don’t deserve. I slowly moved towards him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulled him to the most meaningful kiss I have ever shared with him.

The last 2 months of my pregnancy feel like a nightmare. I’m as big as a house and can never get comfortable no matter which position I’m in. Half the time I find myself wishing the damn baby would just go ahead and sever my spinal cord for me so that the pain would stop, but of course I’m not that lucky. It’s hard to eat and keep anything down, but Haymitch does his best to keep me fed and hydrated.

The doctor in 12 comes by on a daily basis to check on me, but he’s concerned about my blood pressure and how long I still have before the due date. Though he thinks he’s out of earshot, I can hear him telling Haymitch that we should considering going to the Capitol for the duration of my pregnancy.

“She’ll have better care. And better medications to ease the pain and lower her blood pressure.”

When Haymitch starts packing our bags, I know he’s not going to consult me on this, and—for once—that’s fine with me.

After a week of bed rest in the hospital, I’m going stir crazy. Haymitch stays with me day in and day out, but his presence is starting to irritate me, so I tell him to bug off for a while and stop hovering over me. The doctors are dosing me up with pain medication that isn’t as strong as morphling, but feels just as good, so I end up sleeping off most of my boredom.

It’s 2 weeks before I’m due when the contractions begin. The doctors tell me that some women experience ‘false alarms’ around this time but when my water breaks, there’s no doubting that the baby is on the way.

It takes 43 hours to deliver Primrose Mica Everdeen-Abernathy—43 excruciating hours in which
I exhaust my repertoire of profanities, mostly directed at Haymitch as he stands there reminding me to breathe. Breathe my ass. You try pushing something the size of a watermelon through something the size of a lemon and tell me how easy it is to breathe.

Haymitch looks white as a ghost as they whisk baby Prim away to clean her off and swaddle her, and I’m still gripping his hand so tight that I’m sure he’s lost all circulation in his fingers.

When the nurse finally places my daughter in my arms, the world around us disappears and suddenly the two people with me are the most important things in my life. My family… Haymitch and Prim. Haymitch is looking at her with a look of awe and I shift her towards him.

“Take her.” I say gently.

He shakes his head. “I’ve never held one before. I don’t want to drop her.”

I roll my eyes. “You won’t. Come on; make a cradle with your arms.” I remember the way my mother taught me how to hold my sister after she’d been born. Haymitch hesitantly follows my instructions and I place Prim in his arms. He’s stiff and uncertain, but then Prim opens her eyes to look up at him and I see him nearly melt under her spell.

As I watch him holding our daughter, I think about my dream—about the future us watching Prim play in the field of flowers as we hold hands—and I can’t help but feel that this is the way it was always supposed to be. I never really loved Peeta…not the way I love Haymitch.

“Haymitch…” I wait until he’s looking at me. “Do you remember when I told you I didn’t want to marry you?”

His eyes are boring into mine, but he doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

When he leans in to kiss me, I feel truly happy for the first time in years.

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Fin.

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