The Meadow

by supergirrl

Summary

...he smiles, and beside me, I feel Gale suck in a breath. Peeta's smile, which was the same in the mud or in the Capitol, has been replicated perfectly in his son.

Notes

Hello everyone! This is my first story I've posted here but I have posted other stories on fanfiction.net as supergirrl. This story was originally written before Mockingjay was released, so Finnick and Prim are not dead. I hope you all enjoy this, and if you have any questions just ask!

“Katniss...what are you doing?”
I pull away, my lips still tingling from the pressure of the kiss. Peeta looks disheveled and a little confused from my fervent and unexpected embrace, since I never initiate physical intimacy when the cameras aren’t around. His trusting gaze steels my resolve to be open with him. I’ve never been good at expressing my feelings, not like Peeta, but the knowledge that our time together is limited somehow makes the words come more easily.

“We’re going to die, Peeta. At least one of us is going to die in that arena, and I just have to do this once, before our chance is gone.”
His brow furrows as he scowls; so far we’ve carefully avoided the topic of what tomorrow will bring. “You don’t know that this will be your only chance. When you come home, Gale will be there, waiting for you. If you want to, you can build a life with him, experience intimacy and love
“No.” My voice is soft, but in the utter silence of my Capitol bedroom, that one word seems impossibly loud.

“What?” Peeta pulls away from me, staring down at my face, his blue eyes visible in the gloom.

“What do you mean?”

The intensity in his expression is too much for me, and I look instead at a spot just over his shoulder while I collect my thoughts. I can’t…I don’t know how to tell him this, but I have to try. "I mean there is no other chance and no other life for me. If you die and I survive…there is no one else. Our chance, here and now, is the only one we’ll ever have. I don’t want to share this with anyone but you. There’s only this, only us. And I know if we don’t do this now, I will regret it forever.” For a moment, Peeta tries to speak, his eyes burning with emotion. But for once, he has no words. He gently takes my face into his hands and tips it upwards, looking at me as no one else can, and I know I’ve made the right choice. This is something I would never be able to share with anyone else. Not like I do with him.

This kiss is like the one we shared in the cave, stirring something deep inside of me, and I press myself against him, eager to deepen our contact. It still isn’t enough, though. I let go of the balled-up sheets and throw my arms around him, pulling him down on top of me as we fall back onto the bed. Our teeth clank in the process, and we pull apart for a moment, laughing. He rests his forehead on mine, then whispers, “I love you now, I have always loved you, and I will never stop loving you.” As usual, I am no match for his eloquence, and all I can say is, “I know. I…I love you too.”

I hesitate for a moment before answering. I’d hoped to avoid this topic, because I don’t want to remind him that I fully intend to die for him in the arena, something he would do anything to prevent. The combination of the period of starvation after my father’s death and the stress of Seam life, not to mention the Games themselves, have probably made me less fertile than a normal girl my age. It’s not uncommon among the poorer families of District 12, and since I don’t want kids, it has never been an issue for me. “I don’t have any, but I don’t think it’s necessary. My periods have always been irregular and I haven’t had one since before the Games anyway.” As I speak, I trace patterns down his back with my fingers and he shivers at my touch before replying, “Okay, that’s fine. You would know best.” I know he’s only agreeing because he plans for me to be the one who survives these Games, but all I want now is to forget the painful reality of our situation and share this moment with him. I arch myself up against him, our mouths meeting again, and we’re gone.

It was new and it was ancient beyond time. It was wonderful and it was heart wrenching. It was fleeting and it was forever. Pain slices through my abdomen as surely as if I’d been stabbed, and I choke back a scream. I’d always considered myself to be something of an expert on pain. I’ve been cut and burnt and starved, and I’m certainly no stranger to the agony of losing someone you love. Pain has been my enemy for a long time but it’s a familiar enemy. But the pain of labor—this is a new hell, and a new kind of fight. My archery and survival skills are useless here, because the threat is coming from inside of me. My body is trying to destroy itself from the inside out, and I’m helpless to stop it. The ugly grey ceiling presses down on me; I can’t breathe in this place of stale air and no real light. Instead, I tried to imagine that I’m in the place this all started, my darkened bedroom in the Capitol, the night before the Quell. The sunset was so beautiful that day, the day I thought would be my last day of life. I doubt I’ll ever see anything but drab grey walls ever again, because I think I’m dying here, in the tunnels beneath District 13.

My death will be, without a doubt, the most ironic moment in the history of the Games. This—just like every instant of my life since Prim’s name was called at the Reaping, what seems like a lifetime ago—is just another part of the Games, the Games that have sucked me up wholly. When I die—which is inevitable now—it will not be because of a mutt, another tribute, or even some
Gamemaker-controlled event. No, I will die bringing life into the world. A sharp new wave of pain swept through me, and I give myself up to the agony. I just want to give up, let this suffering bear me away to a place where nothing hurts anymore. I know I should want to fight for the babies inside of me, fight for the chance to give them life, but I don’t. Any child born like this, under the shadow of war and suffering and death, will be cursed. Gale must see the doubt in my eyes, because he leans over me and puts his hand on my face, saying firmly, “Katniss, you need to be strong. You can’t give up yet. You can do this!” He’s crouched beside my bed, refusing to leave me, offering me emotional support as Prim and my mother tend to me.

The contraction subsides, giving me a moment’s respite, and I look up at my mother and Prim’s haggard faces. I may be useless here, but they are entirely in their element, working on me in perfect synchrony, without even needing to speak to each other. They’re trying to be positive, but I see the looks they give each other, and I know what they’re not telling me. The narrowness of my pelvis meant that I was supposed to have a Caesarean section, but the babies have come early. My labor progressed so fast that there’s no chance for surgery now. Then another contraction is on me, the worst one yet, and I am screaming again, loud enough to wake the dead. But no matter how loudly I scream, nothing will bring the father of these babies back to me.

“Katniss!” My mother’s voice pierces the haze of pain filling my mind. “You’re almost there! We can see the hair! Your baby’s almost here!” All I can do is let out another groan, and push. For a moment, it’s unbearable, and I’m crushing Gale’s fingers with my own, and then it’s gone, and there’s a baby crying. I lift my head weakly, and see her, shrieking and covered in blood. It’s the girl. My daughter. Our daughter.

I only have a second to feel relieved before the pains come back again, worse than ever, and I’m so weak, I can’t stand it this time. My body feels like it’s about to burst-Glimmer's bloated body flashed through my mind-, I'm tearing in two-Rue, impaled by a spear, one of my worst memories- and I can hear myself begging for it to stop-Cato pleading for mercy, as near to me as if it was happening right now. The nightmares that only Peeta could soothe are back, except now, they’re coming when I’m awake. I need him to come, to take them away.

“Peeta!” I choke out his name, and for a moment, I see him there, standing above me. I drop Gale’s hand and reach up to touch him, but my fingers grasp only air. Both of my hands are clutching at the space above me now, and I’m confused. Where is he? I’m in pain. I’m suffering. I'm dying. He's always been there, to pull me out, to ease my agony, if only for a minute. He gave me the bread. He kept me alive in the arena. He kept away the nightmares. So why isn't he here now?

“Where is he?” I gasp out the words, and Prim shakes her head, tears running down her thin cheeks. “Katniss, he's not…he's not here any more. But he'd want you to fight, you have to fight. For your children.”

Gale’s voice shakes, but his words are firm. “You can't give up, Katniss! The Capitol will have won if you do. Snow would want you to give up!”

For the first time in my life, I ignore them, two of the people I care about the most. I don't want to fight. All I have done my life is struggle to stay alive, and all I’ve gotten for it is suffering. I am weary of it, and I want to die, right here, right now. They can cut my other baby out of my corpse, and my family can raise them together, while I sleep forever in a wooden box, with Peeta, with my father, with everyone I love, where I belong. I can feel myself fading, everything becoming fainter, even the pain. Suddenly the oppressive weight of my belly is gone, and I feel light again. I know I’m close.

“Katniss! Katniss!” Gale’s yelling my name. He can see the fog in my eyes, the same kind of fog he’s seen a thousand times in a dying deer, and he’s crying openly now, because they're losing me, and they know it.

I don’t care. I just want this-labor, the painful struggle that has been my life- to be over with, and if death is the way to achieve this, I am fully willing to die. If this is dying, I wonder vaguely, it's not so bad. Maybe I should feel afraid of what will happen to me after I die, but I’m not. Instead I wonder
about the people I’ve known who have gone the same way I’m going. My family and allies and victims, are they all waiting for me on the other side? Their faces flash through my mind, if only for a moment, and I feel them beckoning me, even the ones who were my enemies in life. Death has made equals of us. They're there, waiting for me. I can see them now, but not clearly. It's like I’m looking through a window at them, but a window that hadn't been washed for a long, long time. I can see shapes and hear voices, but their faces are lost to me. As they become clearer, I see less and less of my mother or Prim or Gale. I am coming. It won’t be long. I feel myself rising upwards. The world isn't growing dark; rather, it’s fading out, turning fuzzy and blurry before my eyes. The pain is virtually gone, and all that I can still really feel is Gale's grip on my hand.

My mother's crying too. “You can't leave your daughter! You have to live, at least for her!” I hear Gale's voice, distorted and wavy, speaking to me. “She's blonde, Katniss, just like her father.” And then the barrier between us is gone, the room I’m dying in vanishes, and I can at last see their faces. All of them, smiling at me, even the ones who were my enemies. I see my father's face for the first time in six years, Rue, happy and safe, safe forever. And then there's Peeta, healthy and whole and smiling. Nothing could be more beautiful to me. I can feel his hands on mine, warm, somehow overlapping Gale's rapidly cooling ones. But he's shaking his head at me. “Katniss, you have to go back, while you still can.” His voice is there and not there, because I can still hear my mother and my sister screaming for me. “You can't stay, it's not your time yet. You still have a place in the world and people who need you. And our children…they need their mother.”

“But I don't want to go back,” I whisper, not caring that I sounded like a whining child. “I want to stay here, with you. I can't lose you all again.” “But you won't be.” This time, it's my father speaking, Rue nodding in agreement. “We'll be here, waiting for you. Just a little longer for you in the world, and then we can be together.” “Forever?”

Peeta kisses me lightly on the lips. “Forever.”

“I can…I can live with that.” I don’t want to go, but in my heart, I know that they’re right. I can feel them all fading away, and I touch Peeta's face, his hair, trying to take him all in one last time, before he’s snatched away from me again. Prim’s voice is becoming louder, and I know I only have seconds left here with them. I’m crying now, tears flowing uncontrollably down my face. “I promise I'll tell them all about you. That their father was the best man I’ve ever known, and how much you love them.”

Peeta smiled at me sadly. “You’re going to be a wonderful mother, Katniss. I’ll always love you and them. Death can’t stop love.”

"I love you." I blurt it out, because they're almost gone, and I'm afraid they aren't going to hear me. But they do, and even though he's almost completely gone, I hear Peeta's voice. “We love you, and we'll be with you.” Rue chimes in, “Always.” And then they've vanished, and I'm back in the real world. Everything's sharp and clear and painful, all too real, but I feel myself smile, just the tiniest bit. I can do this. I'm pushing as hard as I can, and that same excruciating pain sweeps over me. But now I've tapped into some new source of strength; I will not let this pain overcome me. After a final, terrific push, the pressure in my pelvis is suddenly gone. I strain my ears for another baby’s cry to join my daughter’s. For a long moment, there’s a terrifying, horrible silence. I try to sit up, but I'm too weak. What's wrong with my baby?

I hear a slap—the baby's not breathing, my mother is trying to wake it up, she’s done this before, with other unresponsive babies. And then…quiet at first, but progressively louder wailing. My mother sighs with relief, and she says, to the room in general, “Your son is fine, Katniss. Not as big as his sister but still healthy.” As my mother turns away with my son, a nurse comes over to help Prim tend to my bleeding, and I let my head flop back onto my pillow in relief. Gale smiles down at me, the relief evident in his face. They're fine, and that's the most important thing, at the moment. I’m so exhausted that I drift off almost immediately, until I feel a gentle hand on my
shoulder.
“Katniss.”
I turn to look at Prim, who is smiling radiantly. In her arms, she’s holding a bundle, which she gently places in my arms. One of the nurses helped unbutton my shirt and position the baby, and my daughter turned her little face towards me as she began to nurse. Finally free from the agonizing haze of labor that clouded my first moments with her, I look at my daughter. She doesn’t look like either one of us. The blonde fuzz on her head isn’t ash blonde, like Peeta’s, more honey-colored than anything. Her face is red and puffy, and none of her features strongly reminded me of Peeta or myself. Then she opens her eyes, and I have to hold back a gasp. Her eyes are that exquisite, uncommon shade of blue that Peeta’s were, something I hadn’t ever thought I would see again. For a moment, all I can do is stare in shock at this perfect little being I had helped create.

“What do you think you’re going to call her?” A nurse is smiling down at us. To be honest, I hadn’t really thought about it. When I first found out I was pregnant, I wanted to wait until we freed Peeta to choose names, so we could do it together. Then after his execution, I hadn’t been able to bring myself to consider names without him, even after I found out I was carrying twins. I stare at her, wondering what kind of person she’ll be. What kind of person I want her to be, what kind of person Peeta would want her to be. And then it comes to me. The words tumble out, but I feel in my gut that they’re right. “Rue. She’s Rue.” At the sound of her name, little Rue sighs softly, and her eyelids flutter shut. From my other side, my mother says, clearly pleased, “She likes it!” She gently positions my son in my other arm, and again I am struck by his perfection. He looks more like me than his sister, with an olive tint to his skin and dark hair. Like his sister, he currently resembles an angry old man, but his tiny features are beautiful to me.

I had almost dozed off again when there’s an urgent knocking at the door. It creaks open, and I can hear my mother arguing with someone, then Gale joining in. That voice…it sounds familiar. I look up, and there is Mr. Mellark, straining to get a look at his grandchildren. “Let him in.” The strength in my voice is surprising, and my mother turns to give me a disapproving look.

“Katniss, you just gave birth. Maybe Mr. Mellark can come back later, when you’ve had some time to rest and get cleaned up?” I shake my head. I don’t know how much of this is actually about her sense of propriety as opposed to their history, but whether she likes it or not, they now share grandchildren. “No, he has a right to see them, the same as you.” Reluctantly, she steps aside, and he rushes to my bedside. He freezes when he sees them, resting peacefully in my arms. They are the only family he had left. His wife and older two sons had been killed during the destruction of District 12; he’d only escaped because he in Peeta’s house in Victor’s Village when the onslaught began, giving him time to escape. Peeta’s execution had been the final blow to an already broken man who rarely interacted with the other refugees.

Wordlessly, I hand my son up to him. He stares down at his grandson, and tears well up in his eyes. I look back down at Rue to give him privacy, and he chokes out, “I’m sorry…but Peeta…he looked just like this when he was born. Their faces are exactly the same. It’s…it’s almost like having my son back. Wh-what are you going to name him?”

“Peeta. That way, his father will be with him, always.”

Mr. Mellark is silent for a moment, staring down at me and the children. Then he says simply, “This is the legacy Peeta would have wanted. Not to be a victor or a war hero, but to be a father. I’m so sorry that he couldn’t be here for this, he would have been such a good parent. But I know you’ll love them as much as he would have, and give them good lives.” Without saying anything else, he hands little Peeta back to me and leaves. Effie would have been shocked but I understood. Sometimes there just wasn’t anything else to say.

As much as I appreciate his visit, Mr. Mellark’s words kindle a new fear inside of me: what kind of mother will I be? Will I be able to give my children the life they deserve, the life that Peeta would have been able to give them? Or will I go away inside like my mother did after my father died, lose myself in grief and neglect my children? A shiver runs down my spine, and I look down at their innocent faces, steeling my resolve. I will—I must—be strong for them. I will be the parent
my mother couldn’t be.
The crowd of people presses in around me, and I stand on my toes to look over their heads. I see at the woman standing on a stage, with such outlandish clothing and hair that she must be a citizen of the Capitol. She turns in my direction, and I see she is faceless, with smears of red where she should have a mouth and eyes. The crimson gash of her mouth twists in a smile as she ‘sees’ me, and her hand plunges into a large glass bowl filled with paper slips. I can’t breathe as she pulls out a slip of paper. No, it can’t be. The Games are gone, the Reaping is done, this should not, cannot be happening. And yet it is.

Paralyzed with fear, I can only watch as she unfolds the paper and trills, “Our tributes are…Rue and Peeta Everdeen!”

No. No. This can’t be happening. Two young children break free of the crowd, a slight girl with blonde braids and a stockier boy with dark hair, their hands clasped together. As they mount the stage, I noticed the back of her shirt has come untucked from her skirt, and my knees give out. They turn to face the crowd, and I see Peeta again in my daughter’s blue eyes and the firm jut of my son’s jaw. Without thinking, I throw myself forward, determined to get them off that stage at any cost. But the people around me grab me, holding me back, and I fight as hard as I can. I don’t have a bow so I use my fists and teeth, biting and clawing anything that stands between me and my children. My desperation gives me strength and I’m fighting my way through the crowd, almost to the stage, when my daughter screams, “Momma, momma save-” Her cry cuts off with a shriek of pain, and I break inside.

A spear has pierced my Rue’s abdomen, and she crumples down onto the stage, eyes wide with shock. Her brother is beside her, kneeling in a growing pool of blood, and by the time I reach them, her chest has stopped moving. I let out an inhuman howl of grief and rage, clapping little Peeta against me. I am determined to shield him from any danger, I will die before I let anyone hurt him. No harm will come to him in my arms.

“You’re safe now, Peeta, I promise.” I press my son’s face against me, knowing I would do anything to keep him safe.

I feel a sudden rush of heat, and instinctively pull him closer, but then there’s undeniable stench of burning skin and suddenly my son is screaming. Flames lick at his skin, and I push him down onto the rough wooden stage and throw myself on top of him, trying to extinguish the fire, but it only gets worse, spreading faster than real fire ever could. The burns spread across his skin at lighting speed, and his screams fade as he turns to ash and crumbles before my very eyes. I’m wailing again, incoherent with grief and smeared with my son’s ashes. I tear at my clothes, registering that I’m wearing my mockingjay dress, my last dress as the Girl on Fire, and that my fire killed my son.

Everyone I love dies. I can’t protect any of them.

I jerk awake violently, choking back my screams and trying to tell myself that it was just a dream as I shake with fear. The babies are six months old, and my nightmares are back and worse than ever. I can’t take any medication to sedate myself because I’m nursing them, and so I wake up multiple times every night, screaming and terrified. The dreams are worse than ever, because now I watch my children die in a million different ways. I relive Peeta’s death over and over, every time I close my eyes. Prim sleeps in my bed every night, to comfort me and try to calm me down. It helps but what I really want is my children. My mother keeps them in her bedroom at night, and I hate having them away from me. She says it’s to keep my terrors from waking them up at night, but I know she’s afraid that I might hurt them. Part of me hates her for thinking that I would ever hurt them, but another part is grateful. I don’t know what I might do.

My thrashing hasn’t woken an exhausted Prim, but I’m too restless to fall back asleep. I throw back my blankets and pad silently from the room. My mother’s door is unlocked, thankfully, and I slip inside and step over to the crib. We have two cribs but the babies sleep better together, so they are curled up in one crib, Rue nestled against her brother’s back. Both are sleeping soundly, and watching them sleep together, safe and untroubled, fills me with an unfamiliar emotion, one that I can’t quite place. As quietly as I can, I pull the rocking chair over to the crib and sit down, leaning forward to stroke their faces. Rue stirs at my touch, and I freeze as
her eyes fluttered open. Her eyes are still the same exquisite blue as Peeta’s, and I feel a stab of pain in my heart whenever she looks at me. Instead of crying, like I expect her to, she catches hold of my thumb with her tiny hand and drifts back off. At the same time, her brother’s little fingers curl around the index finger of my other hand, pulling it close. With a great rush of emotion I recognize what I’m currently feeling. This is the same sense of calm that their father had given me whenever he soothed my nightmares. They are giving me the peace that I thought had died with Peeta. I will protect them with my life, and maybe they can heal me.

As I watch them, I drift back off to sleep, but this time, it’s deep and dreamless. My mother finds me like that the next morning, sleeping hunched over halfway into their crib, my head lolling forward onto my chest. My back aches all day but it’s worth the newfound hope that invigorates me. Just as Peeta had given me the life-saving bread during the period of starvation after my father’s death, his final gift to me had been these children, and they will save me from this depression. In their faces I see the promise of hope and new life, of springtime after a winter of suffering, like that dandelion in the schoolyard so many years ago.

My daughter’s laughter floats across the grass as her brother tickles her, and I smile at their antics. I’m content to just watch them play for hours; I find everything about my children endlessly fascinating.

I hear soft footsteps behind me, and I’m immediately on my feet, bow in hand, an arrow nocked in place. Even years later, my instincts from the Games haven’t gone away, and I always keep my bow on me. Nothing is more important to me than our safety. But it’s only Gale, striding out of the woods with a grin on his face. He still has his velvet tread, or else he wouldn’t have been able to nearly sneak up on me. I drop my bow and wrap him in a hug.

“You finally came to visit! How did you find us up here, anyway?” Very few people know where we go, when we need to be alone. That's part of the beauty of this place. Up here, we’re away from the press, the politicians, the people who see my kids as celebrities, commodities, symbols. And no matter how hard I try to keep their day-to-day activities private, they live in the public eye. They have since the day they were born, and they will for the rest of their lives. But under the lens of a camera is no way for a child to grow up. Here, they can be normal children, happy and free.

“Your mother told me. She said you wouldn’t mind if I came up here to meet you. Do you, Catnip?”

I shake my head, smiling at hearing him use my old nickname. It’s a tie to who I was before the Games, before I was a victor or a mother, when I was just a girl from the Seam. Gale is one of the few people left who knows me from those days. “No, I don’t mind, I was just wondering. How is Johanna? You should bring her for a visit sometime. The kids would love to see her.”

Johanna can’t bring herself to leave District 7, so Gale divides his time between there and District 12. She says her dead are there and she can’t abandon them. To anyone else this sentiment might sound macabre or gruesome, but I understand. More than once I’ve been tempted to pack up and leave District 12, start a new life somewhere else, but I know I never will. My father’s ashes are here, along with Madge’s and Peeta’s family, and I can’t leave them.

“She’s doing great, she misses you. She told me to give you her love. And you? How are the…” He trails off, unsure if he’s being too invasive, but I know what he’s asking. Now that he’s lived with a victor, he’s experienced firsthand the nightmares, the flashbacks, the memories that never really leave you. To this day Finnick and Annie can’t spend a night apart, and although little Peeta and Rue adore their Uncle Haymitch, they know not to come up behind him too quickly or wake him up.

“Better,” I say firmly, hoping the tone of my voice will shut down this particular line of conversation. As close as I am to Gale, there are some things I can’t share with him, things that only other victors can ever understand. Even though I appreciate his concern, I know it’s time to change the topic, “Are you ready for me to call the kids? They’ve really been looking forward to seeing you.”

He smiles. "Of course! I brought presents back for them, but I left them at your house."

"I'm sure they won't care once they see you're back." Turning back towards my children, I call out, "Rue! Peeta! Come here!"
Rue comes bounding up the hill first, her ash-blonde curls bouncing around her face. My mother says that her face looks like mine did at that age, but her coloring is all Peeta's. Her hair lightened with age, but her perfect blue eyes have stayed the same. She beams at Gale and me. “Momma, it's Uncle Gale!”

“He’s home for a visit! Look at what I made for you, Rue!” Bending down, I pick up the crown I had woven from daisies and willow strands from the great tree I had been sitting beneath. “I made this for you, honey.”

“What's that, Momma, what's that?” Rue has her father's enthusiasm for discovering new things, and her joy is contagious.

I smile at her excitement. "It's a crown!" She jumps up and down and claps with delight. I hold up the crown, and she stops, lowering her head regally to accept it. “I crown you Princess of the Meadow. And here's my prince!”

Peeta—little Peeta, that is—pushes his way through the waist-high daisies to reach us. He resembles me more, with grey eyes and dark skin, though his hair is lighter than mine, a chestnut-brown color. He's less exuberant than his sister, like me, but there’s one thing that was wholly his father. When he sees the crown in my hands that matches the one perched atop his sister's head, he smiles, and beside me, I hear Gale suck in a breath. Peeta's smile, which was the same in the mud or in the Capitol, has been replicated perfectly in his son. At that moment, his face is like a smaller version of his father's.

He accepts his crown as well, and when he turns away to show his sister a leaf he picked up off the ground, Gale whispers to me, “Has he always…” He trails off, apparently at a loss for words. I understand how he feels. It's unsettling to see something you thought had passed from this world forever, recreated before your eyes. Even though I'm with him almost constantly, little Peeta's resemblance to his father can be unnerving. It isn't just his face; the way he speaks eerily echoes Peeta's charisma and way with words, even at his young age. Even his movements and the way he walks are reminiscent of his father. Sometimes, Mr. Mellark can hardly bear to speak to him, it stirs up so many painful memories.

“Yes,” I reply, sparing him the trouble of trying to finish his sentence. “It's gotten more obvious as he gets older. By the time he's a teenager, he'll look just like his father.” I feel something tighten in my throat as I thought of Peeta, but I force myself to swallow it. Now is not the time.

“Do they…know?”

“Not all of it. They know that their father's not here any more, but they don't know why, exactly. I won't tell them everything until they're older.”

Gale leans back against the willow tree that shades us. “That's probably best.”

We're silent for a moment, watching the children play. I can see a kind of longing in Gale's eyes as he watched them, and I think of the offer he made me four years ago, before he and Johanna fell in love. We would get married, and he would be their father until they were old enough to know the truth. And as much as it hurt me, I rejected him. I couldn’t lie to them—not like that. And I hadn't been lying to Peeta, either, when I said that there was no one else. I know now, without a doubt, that there never would be.

“Why do you come up here?” Gale's voice startles me from my reverie, and it takes me a moment to reply. As it’s not very deep into the woods, it’s not a place where we hunted, though he’s familiar with it.

“We first came here, sometimes I needed to be by myself. So I'd leave the babies with my mom or Prim, and walk in the woods alone, to hunt and think. And one day, I rediscovered this place, and I knew it was perfect. So when the kids were old enough, I started bringing them out here, and now we come almost every day.”

He nodded, and we're quiet again, until Rue grabs onto my leg and says in her earnest way, “Momma, when Uncle Gale left, he said he'd have presents when he came back. Where are they?”

"Back at the house. We can go now, if you want, or stay for a while…” Gale trails off teasingly, and both Peeta and Rue laugh. Peeta says, “We want to go now!”

Gale shrugs and gave me a half-smile, “Sounds good to me. Now, who wants to get a piggyback
ride?” I watch with a smile on my face as they clamber to climb onto his back. Gale starts to walk back under the cover of the trees, but hesitates, “Are you coming, Katniss?” “I’ll be there in a minute, just go ahead without me.” I want a moment alone. “No problem, Catnip.” He walks away, both children hanging off his back, and after a few minutes, their sounds of their laughter and talking fade.
I stare out at the meadow, wondering how different things would have been if Peeta had lived. We would have been so, so happy, I know that. Our life together would have made all of the struggles worth it.
I try not to let myself dwell on those what-ifs, though. Instead, I focus on what Peeta did change. I know that one day, I will tell my children that their father was the bravest man in the world, and he died so they would be safe. I just hope that they’d feel some kind of connection to him, that he’d be more than just a name. I want them to understand the sacrifice he made. Their names would never go in a Reaping ball, nor would the names of any other person ever again. They would live safe, peaceful, and free-forever. And so would their children, and theirs, and every descendant of ours for the rest of time.
He had died to make the whole world a place just like this meadow. A place where his children could be safe.
Rue's meadow was reality.

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