

Chapter 26

The rest of that day is a blur. I vaguely remember walking through the town; even knocking once more upon the sweet shop. Still no answer, but I think I see the plates I set there the night before.

I regain semi-consciousness later at my kitchen table with a knife in one hand, and an empty bottle in the other.

Why not? I think to myself.

I look at the hand gripping the bottle and my eyes travel up the wrist and to the crook elbow. My eyes swirl around the empty patch of skin between and I gaze at it longingly.

I bring my knife up to my arm and gently caress the tip against the skin, up and down, up and down.

In training they taught us about arteries, which ones to cut and how to do it. Suddenly words ring clear as a bell in my head.

"Down the road, not across the street."

I place the tip of my knife right underneath the base of my palm, still gripping the bottle, and begin to try to increase the pressure. Beads of rubies begin to pop, but rather than give me courage, they steal it from me as I remember it's not only my blood I'd be spilling.

I sit there fermenting for a while, then look up at the clock on the wall and it says 10:00p.m. I decide to go up to bed. I lay restless with a large headache and realize that I have to puke. I race to the bathroom and just make it in time. I feel dizzy and stagger my way back to my bed.

When I wake from nightmares, I slash wildly at the night with the knife still clutched in my hand. One thought banging around in my aching head.

They're extra vicious at night!

I decide that I can't take it anymore. I run downstairs, find another one of my bottles of white liquor and crack it open. I keep taking from it until I can't remember anything. Not who I am, what I've done, or what has been done. Finally, when my swimming mind sees the first orange and red rays of the dawn, I pass out.

Things go on like this for a while. How long exactly... I haven't the slightest.

Days, weeks, maybe even months, I can't find myself. I only come to in patches. Going to the Hob, staggering around the town and my house. I even remember gazing into the school yard, where not too long ago, Brie, the squirt, even I had been.

I know I stand there until... someone... I think one of the teachers runs me off. Things become blurry again and the next thing I know, I'm kneeling in front of the courthouse sobbing until I collapse on the ground. I vaguely register hands pulling me up and... and leading me off.

I awake sometime later, fully conscious with a head threatening to split in two. I'm going to throw up again, so I get up and make my way to the bathroom. After expelling what smells to be pure white liquor, I sit on the floor for a moment, cheek pressed down on the seat, arm around the rest as if I'm trying to guard the toilet with my body.

After a few moments of sitting there, trying to regain my breath. I notice that the part of my legs that are on the tiled floor, are cold. I look down and see I'm completely naked.

Oh no, what exactly did I do?!

I go back to my bedroom to put on a new set of clothes and find another bottle. On my way to the kitchen, however, I hear someone using the stove.

Frying something by the sound of it. I search for my knife before realizing I didn't grab it when I got dressed, it's probably still lying on my bed. Then I hear a male voice. It was humming, sometimes breaking into low song.

Screw it, I think, and walk into the room; prepared to attack with my own teeth if necessary.

Inside the kitchen, standing in front of the stove is a young man in a full, Capitol suit. He turns his head and sees me in the doorway.

Continuing on with his task he says in a cheery voice, "Ahh, there you are. I didn't think you'd be up this early, but I'd hoped the smell of food would rouse you. After all you purged last night, I knew you'd have to be starving. There/s no food in the place, so I went into town while you were out and picked up a few things."

"Last night? What happened?" I ask still trying to clear my head.

"Well, as soon as I got into town yesterday, I set out to find you. *That* was the easy part. I watched you stumble around for a while. Then, when I saw you lying face down in a puddle of your own sick, I figured it was time I stepped in.

"I took you home, cleaned you off, and spent the rest of the night cleaning up the many puddles you left around the house... You're welcome by the way." He gives a scoffing chuckle.

I shuffle a little closer, still not exactly trusting him and ask, "What is that?"

"Breakfast!" He says cheerfully. "Want some?"

The thought of food makes my stomach want to rebel.

I swallow hard and answer with a, "No, thanks."

"Oh, I know what you must be feeling right now. Believe it or not I've overindulged on occasion, and I was told once the perfect cure for a hangover, is bacon! Have some, I promise, in a bit you'll start feeling better."

I take a couple slices off the plate the young man offers and get a real good

look at his face.

"Wait, I know you!"

The young man smiles as if he knows my train of thought.

"You're the guy I met during my private session with the Gamemakers.

You were the one who ran the simulator, right?"

He smiles even wider, throws up his hands in a surrendering gesture and says, "Guilty."

"What are you doing here? Why are you in my house?"

"Well, to be honest, Haymitch, word's gotten around to me about what happened to your family. Let me start by saying that I am truly and deeply sorry for your loss."

All pains in my head forgotten I give a singular harsh, "HA!" I ignore the throbbing in my head and push on. "I'll bet you are! I'll bet the whole Capitol is so sorry for what the President did."

"No, of course not. I'm not saying that..."

"Then what *are* you saying??"

"Oh, come on, Haymitch, throughout the whole game you were able to use your brain. Then, when you get out you stop for some reason?"

He stops for a moment to soften his tone.

"Look, I get it. You're not the first victor to make the mistake of thinking that you had it made from here on out. Well, this is not the case for many victors. People talk and word gets around to my circle of friends. We even have a name for what you've just experienced, we call it 'Victor's Folly.'"

I'm at a loss. He's right, I'd been so focused on the trap I saw (the Games), that I never even stopped to think about any others that I couldn't.

Victor's Folly...

He sees me trying to work it all out in my hungover brain and takes pity

on me.

"Listen, I'm here as a representative for a network of friends that have infiltrated different levels of government, all with the singular goal of bringing down the Capitol."

"Oh yeah? Was Azrael one of your friends?"

"Ah, Azrael..." He says with a shake of his head. "No, unfortunately he wasn't. Although if he was still alive today, we'd probably make the offer. Had he been, he probably wouldn't have pulled that little stunt with the carving you made. That, I'm sorry to say, was the action that made him an unknowing martyr for us.

"Your friend Clay had a similar end. He was trying to dig a whole to the tunnels underneath that pomegranate tree. When the Gamemakers figured it out, they set off the volcano early just to make sure he didn't make it through and cover up the evidence."

"So, what? Because you can't have them, you're going to your second choice?"

"Well, if we're counting Azrael, in the interest of being perfectly honest, you would be our *third* choice."

"What?!"

"Don't get me wrong, Haymitch, you always showed promise. But, there could only be one victor. Clay was never on my radar, but truth be told, I really wanted Calder to win. He was incredibly smart and resourceful. I even talked to him before the Games started, knowing that even if he wanted to, he couldn't tell anyone anything.

"That would've been his greatest asset to us. He would be in the unique position where he could listen and never be heard. He'd be able to go to countless gatherings and as quiet and small as he was, people would naturally

forget he was there... Ah, but se la vi....

"Haymitch, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that you'd like to have a little payback, yeah? I think *you* could be very valuable too. You don't even have to stop your drinking, in fact I'm all for it if that's what you want, just stay sober enough to help me when I need you to. Sound like a good idea?"

It did, I liked not having to feel, and I sure as hell wouldn't mind some payback, but how did I know that this man could help me get it?

"How can your friends think they can stand even a chance at taking down the Capitol? What gives you the slightest hope that such a thing is even possible?"

"Well, let me start by introducing myself, my name is Plutarch Heavensbee. As you know, I work as a low-level Gamemaker, but I have plans of aspiration! Tell me, Haymitch, what do you know about District Thirteen?..."

THE END