

## Chapter 25

The most anticipated day for all of District 12 has finally arrived: Parcel Day!

Since it happened to land on a Sunday, everyone had the day off and was celebrating. People would go collect their share from the Justice building, and everyone would go around with food in their bellies today.

The party didn't officially start until that night, but everyone was going around celebrating in the streets. To a district, particularly the ones that never win the Games, Parcel Day is the one good thing that could come from winning, besides the fact of knowing that one of their own made it back home alive and not bled white in a wooden box. With it being so long since our last victory, the people of 12 have had precious little to celebrate for many years.

When the festivities begin, everyone gathers in the town square where a banquet has been set up. This party is being thrown by the mayor, so in no way does it match the volume of food or drink that you'd find at a Capitol party, but with the fiddles playing and all the district dancing, it looks to me we have a lot more fun.

Everyone who sees me, stops to give me a thanks, a toast, or a slap on the back. It's all for the honor of the day, not for what I had to do in order to make it happen. Most won't mention the Games at all. Those that do say in hushed voices that they know I only did what I had to and that they're glad I was able to make it back.

I spend some time with Ma and the squirt, who seem to be enjoying themselves. I even share a few dances with Brie.

Now, I don't dance, but I have a feeling that woman could make me run for mayor if she wanted. There's just something about her.

The night wears on and many congratulations and toasts later, a thought occurs that I hadn't seen any of Maysilee's family at the party. This doesn't surprise me. They're all still in mourning and Maysilee's twin might be having one of her headaches. A noisy town square in the middle of a party would be the last place they'd want to be.

This gets me thinking, though. Were any of the other tribute's families here? Would I recognize them? Are either families angry at me because I survived and their child didn't?

I decide to take a break from the party, gather up a good amount of food from the table, and try and take it to Maysilee's family. With everyone either in bed, or more likely still at the party, the streets are a dark and deserted place. A chill runs through me although the night air is warm.

When I finally make it to the sweet shop, I see no lights on in the place. I gently knock anyway to see if someone might answer, but no such luck. I leave the bit of food I brought on their doorstep and decide I've had enough celebrating for one night and start to make my way home.

It's almost comical, seeing my house being the only thing lit up in the distance surrounded by the dark district.

When I get closer, I see the outline of what looks like a man, slowly shambling his way towards my house. My hand again goes to a knife that wasn't there and is left wanting. I look around for anything I can use as a weapon. I find a large dead branch on the ground to serve the purpose. I pick it up, and slowly creep up on the figure making its way to my front door.

Just when the figure enters the light I demand, "Stop where you are if you want to live, I've killed before to..."

My words are cut short as the figure turns and I see the blood-covered face of Azrael looking at me. "I... know you... have my... boy... That's you... down to a T... always read..."

Before he could finish, he falls forward. It's all I can do to drop the branch and run forward to grab him before he hits the floor.

"Azrael! What happened to you?! Let's get you inside." I put one of his arms over my shoulder and carry him inside.

"No... time.. Haymitch... Came to warn..."

"I'm not just gonna leave you like this, let's go." I say with another heave.

I manage to get him inside and set him on one of the chairs at the kitchen table. I run to get a damp wash rag while he continues to try to croak out my name.

I come back and start to wipe the blood off his face when a surprisingly strong hand grips my arm. For the first time I see just how bad of shape he's in. I look at the giant holes that riddle his body and realize he's a goner, it's a miracle he hasn't died already.

"Haymitch! They were bringing me here anyway, I managed to give them... the slip."

"Who did this to..."

"Don't talk, just listen. Your family's in danger!"

I feel my whole body go stark white and I feel as if I lost as much blood as he has.

He struggles on and says, "You have to find them, grab them now... anyone you care about and run! Go anywhere, do anything you have to but go now before it's too late."

Just then the phone rings and I run to answer it.

"Hello?"

The only thing that answers... are screams.

Rage instantly grips me at the thought of what was on the other end. I drop the phone as if it were red hot and tear the whole thing out of the wall, then run back to Azrael. I grab him by his shoulders to try and shake him, but as soon as I do, I feel the all too familiar sensation of a body no longer inhabited. I run to the counter, find a knife, and flee from the house back towards the Justice building.

When I reach the town square, I find it completely empty. Lights still on, food still out. Whatever happened here made people leave in a hurry.

Suddenly I hear another scream, but this time my name. I look up at the top of the Justice building, and I see three figures standing a top it. One was very small, half the size of the other two.

"NO, STOP!!!" I shout at the top of my lungs. I run towards the building as fast as I can, but it's no use.

I watch in slow horror as the three figures are pushed, one by one, over the side. They fall a short distance, then stop abruptly. Their bodies intact, dangling from the rope that's silenced their screams forever.

I look up to see the cold, lifeless faces of my mother, my brother, and Brie looking down at me with their last gaze in life, and I fall to my knees, sobbing.

Suddenly, I find myself in the burning elevator once more, this time there are three new faces staring up at me as I sink lower and lower into despair, knowing I'll never be able to leave this place.

Faintly, as if in a dream, I hear footsteps making their way towards me. The world rises back into existence as the sound of heeled shoes hitting hard street make their way towards me. The sickly-sweet scent of roses pervades the air, and I hear a cold, cheery voice.

"Ahh, Mr. Abernathy, we meet again."

Without pausing to think, I clutch the knife in my hands, spin around, rear it up in order to find it a new home, when all at once a massive fist comes out of nowhere, and clocks me in the side of my face. It sends me sprawling, and the knife flying. The two Peacekeepers I hadn't known were there, grab either side of me, force me to my knees and my hands behind my back.

"Glad to see Azrael was well enough to get you here in such a timely manner. I do so hate waiting. Tell me, did he die?"

I renew my struggles to break free but am forced back down with a hard knee to my back.

"He must have... at least by now anyway."

He pauses for a moment looking me up and down then, "I don't know what to do with you, Mr. Abernathy, you simply won't... *die*." Hate is allowed to make its way through the cheery sneer in the last word. Although I don't know quite how, I can tell I've wounded him.

"Guess I'm just special that way." I say and spit blood out of my mouth.

Then, back to his cheery, sneery self, "You were never supposed to make it out of that arena. I had tons of measures in place to ensure you didn't. I promised the tribute from Two, the one with the ring in his nose, that he could have anything he ever wanted if he simply took care of you and out-lived the rest. But you saw to that, didn't you? You have been partially eaten, envenomated, disemboweled, and yet here you are!" He spreads his arms wide jovially.

A smile spreads across his face that doesn't reach his eyes and he continues with a chuckle, "I must say, I admire the lengths you will go to stay alive. And so, I was willing to forgive *all* of that..."

The grin vanishes and a sinister coldness grips his voice as he says, "But then you had to go and pull that little stunt with the forcefield." Then, with an

heir of washing his hands of the matter, "You've tied my hands in this matter, you really have."

"Then why don't you just kill me now?"

"Oh my dear no, Mr. Abernathy. I think to kill you would just be making it easier for you and we can't have that, now can we?"

"Nooooo, no, no, no. Since you seem to rail so hard against death, your punishment will be to live!" The smile reappears and actually lights up his face. "You are going to live and be an example to all your kind; of what happens if you don't play by the rules."

"Rules *you* set?" I say, trying to show contempt.

"Yes!" He says delighted. "You're finally catching on."

"What if I decide to run away, or just kill myself?"

"Won't make the slightest difference to me, but I will tell you that others will die." He says this last part as casually as one might say, it's going to rain tomorrow.

"There's no one left, no one left I care about!"

"Really? Are you so sure? What about all the families of your fellow tributes, take for instance the family of Miss. Donner. You may not necessarily care about these people, but would you really commit to actions on your own life knowing that you'd be taking theirs as well?"

He tisks three times and says, "I think not. No, you, Mr. Abernathy, are going to live a long time."

His point made, and the job done, he looks to the peacekeepers, gives a little nod, a blinding pain goes through the back of my head in a flash of bright red, and everything went dark.

More nightmares of the games as well as all I've just witnessed torment me until I finally wake and find I am at home, in my bed with a splitting

headache. It takes me a moment to realize where I am. For a moment, a flash of hope bolts through me as I think maybe it was all a dream.

*Don't be stupid, then why does your head hurt?*

*Maybe you slipped and fell on your way home from the party. It was really dark.*

I try not to cling on, but the hope begins to spread, despite my best efforts. Suddenly I find myself running, calling for my mother and brother.

Over and over I call, growing more desperate with every shout. I've run through most of the house with no result. When I get to the kitchen, I see the wires poking out from the wall where the phone had been, and I break out into a cold sweat. I call out once more as loud as I can for my mother and brother, but deep inside I know.

When I get to the family room, my heart feels as if it has stopped completely as the last bit of doubt shrivels within.

There, sitting on the coffee table in the middle of the room, was a single, perfect, white rose.

Suddenly, my nose is filled with the pungent, sickly-sweet aroma of roses. I double over and vomit the remains of dinner from the night before. I can't breathe, I need air.

I stagger to the front door and swing it wide with all the strength I had. Cool air hits the sweat on my face and my body finally allows me to take a breath. It comes in hard gasps at first, but slowly begins to ease in effort.

When I gain some control over myself, I hold my breath, grab the vase, and hurl it out the front door. The small glass holder smashes on the sidewalk, but the rose remains undamaged, mocking me with its perfect petals.

I try to go back into the house, but I can still smell roses. I have to get out until the smell is gone. I make it mere feet outside before my legs give out and I crumple to the floor. The realization of everything finally sinks in for good. Felix,

Ma, Brie, even Azrael... all gone. I'm alone.

The gleaming spot of white still flashes in my vision as if refusing to let me forget it's there. My body refuses to work, but I have to move. My mind becomes half crazed with the thought of that stupid rose mocking me. I decide to crawl, inching my way closer to blot out the patch of shining white.

Before I even get close, movement catches my eye, and I freeze. A rabbit comes bounding in and stops in front of the rose. The creature sniffs the air around it, and tentatively begins to nibble. It must have liked what it tasted, because in no time at all the stem had been entirely eaten up. Then, with nothing to hold them, the pedals begin to come loose. I sit there and stare at the rabbit now eating them as well. He eats the ones in front of him, then pursues those that try to run away with the wind. He chases and eats until every bit is gone, then bounds off out of sight.

I get up and my feet carry me into town. There were people on the street, but none would even glance in my direction. Instead, they seemed to quicken their pace to get out of view.

Over the past two weeks, I traveled all around District 12, getting to know it better. But there was one place I had yet to venture.

A large building whose outline now towers in front of me, sits complacent and indifferent with its doors wide open. It was a building that used to warehouse the coal, but once a better way was devised to get it directly from the site on to the train, the building was abandoned by the Capitol and a whole new market opened up within.

As I stand before the large, rust covered, building now known as the Hob, a voice started ringing in my head.

"Listen, Haymitch. I don't know what people have been telling you, but it's not that great." He had said. "You're definitely not the first Victor who thought



about doing this kinda thing, and you won't be the last, but I've got tell you, you *don't* want to go down this road..."

But you're gone, aren't you? You won't have to see me go down this road and I'm starting to think I know why victors have done so before.

Suddenly the day of my interview pops into my head. The amber colored liquid didn't taste good, but it made me not care so much about the interview... and that's what I want now, isn't it?

When I enter the building, I half expect the people in it to turn away from me, but they don't. After all, they know I have money, and in this place... what was the old saying?

Oh yeah, "Cash is king."