Caged Bird

by NotAnIslander

Summary

After the trial for the shooting of Alma Coin, Katniss Everdeen is sentenced to five years labor in District 10. What happens when it's time to go home again?

Notes

First of all, I'd like to thank jennagill for reading my first tidbit and encouraging me to go for it. And thanks to Loueze and Chele20035 for pre-reading. And finally Titania522/c52 for being a wonderful beta! Thank you all for your support. Of course, I own none of this, Suzanne Collins has that distinction.

This idea came to me one day and I couldn't let it go. I don't know if anyone else has written a story where Katniss is convicted of shooting Coin, but it got me thinking what if... So, here we go, what if...
The Homecoming

District 12: The Homecoming

Katniss steps off of the train, satchel in hand, and takes a deep breath. After 5 years in District 10, she is finally home.

She thinks of another time she arrived in 12 on a train. There was cheering and celebration. She and Peeta had just won the 74th Games and they were the newest Victor's in the District. It was quite the homecoming. Today’s was the exact opposite. There are no speeches, no cheering crowds. Just people going about their daily labors.

The morning rush has just begun and people are bustling to and fro on their way to their work and their daily routines. She finds herself jostled by other passengers disembarking and realizes she needs to move on. She waits to be instructed in what to do next, then remembers. Her guards stayed on the train as she departed. With a welcoming smile on their faces, they delivered their charge. She is finally free, well sort of. Finally able to come and go as she pleased, within limits. Her debt to society has been paid off not only by the sweat of her brow, but by the muscles on her back.

For the umpteenth since leaving District 10, she looks at the terms of her release:

- She is to live in District 12 for the rest of her days.
- She may not leave the District without special permission from the ruling bodies of both District 12 and the Capitol.
- She is not allowed to work within the District for at least 1 year, although she is allowed to keep her earnings as a Victor.
- She is not allowed any weapons, therefore she is not allowed to hunt.
- While she is allowed access to the forest surrounding the District, she must report to her parole officer whenever she leaves.
- Her parole officer must know her whereabouts at all times.
- Any violation of these terms would have her sent back to the Capitol permanently.

She takes another quick look around. Not wanting to make eye contact with anyone, she lowers her gaze, and heads to her home in Victors Village.

It doesn't take long for her house to come in to view. It looks the same, but still different. She can't place why. In her absence, the property has been kept neat and tidy. The color is still the same. It doesn't look like it's been abandoned, it looks just like it has been patiently waiting for her to return.

As she stares, she sees a flash of orange out of the corner of her eye. Buttercup? Yes, definitely Buttercup, only a shinier, cleaner version. The cat comes up to her, sniffs, then turns around and walks away without even a hiss to greet her. "Well, that's one introduction over with," she thinks.

As she steps up on to the porch, she looks over to the side of the house, noticing some flowers blowing in the breeze. "Roses? Who would have the nerve? Were they still following her? Where is he? I thought he was dead? Did they leave me here at Snow's mercy?" Panic spreads through her. She begins to sweat, her heart pounds, and her breath comes out in short puffs. Then she remembers. "No, Snow was gone. It's a new world. No one will bother her like that again."

She takes several deep breaths, wipes her hands on her jeans, and focuses on the door in front of her until she feels her heart slowing down. So, what kind of flowers? She looks at the flowers again. Not roses. Primroses. Someone planted primroses on the side of her house. But why? It seems to be a while ago by the looks of them. They are healthy, and definitely well established.

A sad, bittersweet smile spreads across her face. Primrose. Had it been 5 years? Oh, how she had missed her sister. How she misses her still. The ache wasn't as constant. But every so often, the truth of it all hits her. There were times, early on in her sentence, that she would imagine conversations with Prim. "You did the right thing, Katniss, it's just a little while and you'll be going home." Those were the thoughts that kept her going. Maybe they didn't keep her completely sane, but at least they kept her functioning.

She wondered who planted the flowers. Her mother? No, certainly not her. Last she knew, her mother was living in 4, working at the hospital there. She knew her mother had checked up on her, but as part of her sentence, she wasn't allowed contact with family or friends. She wonders if anyone else ever asked about her. Or did they just get on with their own lives, grateful to be relieved of the duty of taking care of the Mockingjay?

Should she call her mother now? Was it too late? Would it ever be the right time? She couldn't think about that now. That was for later. Right now, she needs to get inside and get settled. It was time to begin the rest of her life, such as it was.

As she steps into her house and drops her satchel, she notices that it has been kept neat and clean. Everything is still in its place. There are pictures on the mantle, flowers on the table, it looks lived in and loved.

She smells something, like a stew simmering on the stove. Following the scent, she steps into the kitchen, and automatically realizes that she has made a mistake. She notices someone standing over a pot. "Maybe I shouldn't be here. Maybe this isn't my house anymore? Maybe I was wrong. Darnit!" She really had no clue what she was doing anymore. Panic began to set in. She needs to get it together, and quick.

Greasy Sae turned around, looks her up and down. "Welcome home girl! We've missed you!" As he said the first time in 5 years, Katniss allowed herself to feel. As the tears rolled down her cheeks, as the sobs wracked her body, Katniss falls to the ground, overcome by the enormity of all that had happened.
“After two days of lying on her mattress with no attempt to eat, drink, or even take a morphling tablet, the door to Katniss’s room opens.” (Mockingjay, p. 377)

“Wake up Ms. Everdeen, you are being transferred.”

She stares groggily at the guard. “Where am I going?”

“She lays them, uncaring. The guards have to come in and force her to get ready. There is no resistance; none is allowed. Fluids and nutrients are pumped into her system, regardless of her wishes. After this, she is given a satchel with 7 sets of identical clothing: 7 t-shirts, 7 long sleeve button up cotton shirts, 7 pairs of blue jeans, 7 sets of underthings, and one pair of work boots. All plain. All utilitarian.

She sighs as they force her to change her clothes and march her to the hovercraft, shackles on her wrists and her ankles. As she’s strapped into her seat. For the third time in her life, they put a tracker in her arm. “We need to know where you are at all times now, Ms. Everdeen,” they tell her.

She thinks back to the other two times they’ve put a tracker in. The first time, she didn’t know what they were doing. The second time, she had no idea that in a few days Johanna would be ripping it out of her arm. She’s never had one in for more than a few weeks. She wonders if she will eventually forget about this one. Five years she’ll have it in. Five years. She doesn’t know if she can allow herself to think that long in the future.

Once the hovercraft takes off they give her the terms of her conviction and incarceration:

“For shooting President Alma Coin in cold blood, the defendant, Katniss Everdeen, has been found guilty.

-As a result of this conviction, the People of Panem sentence Katniss Everdeen to 5 years hard labor in an undisclosed location outside of the Capitol, District 13, and District 12.

-Because of the fame of the convict, there will be no disclosure as to the whereabouts of Ms. Everdeen.

-Ms. Everdeen is not allowed contact with anyone, outside of the people she will be directly working with on a daily basis.

-There will be no chance of appeal to this case.

-There will be no time off for good behavior.

-The defendant will follow any and all instructions given to her, no questions asked.

-If the defendant does not follow through on all counts of this sentence, she will be transferred back to The Capitol, where she will remain in solitary confinement until the end of her sentence.

-The defendant must fulfill the entire time of her incarceration.”

As the hovercraft takes off, she closes her eyes and thinks of Prim. It was all for her anyway.

“Katniss,” she imagines Prim saying. “You can do this. It’s only 5 years. You can make it.”

A small tear falls down her cheek and she quickly wipes it away. She won’t allow them the satisfaction of knowing they’ve gotten to her. She takes a deep breath and pretends to fall asleep.

The hovercraft lands in District 10. Armed guards meet them at the landing spot, and the transfer of the prisoner is complete. The only things she notices about this district are the dust and the vast amounts of space. Katniss is shuttled into a vehicle before she knows what is happening. There are no crowds waiting here. No cheers. No jeers. The Mockingjay is in town, but she has no voice, no wings. She’s like a bird in a cage; the Mockingjay no longer sings.

The car pulls up to a large two story white farmhouse. It’s about the same size as her home in Victor’s Village, back in 12. A dark skinned woman, who looks to be in her fifties, comes down to greet them. She’s wearing blue jeans and a button down shirt, similar to what Katniss has. Her graying hair is pulled back out of her face. She’s not a petite woman, but she’s not all that big either.

She’s tough though, Katniss can tell. She knows instinctively that it wouldn’t do to cross this woman. And yet, there’s a look in her eyes that Katniss wants to fall into. If necessary, this woman would open her arms and embrace Katniss. Her look says, “Let me help you girl.”

Her voice, however, says, “Well, Katniss Everdeen, as I live and breathe! Welcome to Three Heifers ranch. The name’s Maggie. I’ll quickly go over the daily routine while those men put your things in the bunkhouse.” As she says this, she gives a look to the guards who take Katniss’ satchel to a building across a courtyard.
“Wake up is 5 o’clock, breakfast 5:30. Ranch work begins at 6 and we break for dinner at noon. Work ends at 6, with supper at 6:30. Free time in your bunkhouse from 7:30, and lights out at 9. We take turns preparing and cleaning up after meals.”

As all of this is said, Katniss has a look of confusion on her face. “How will I ever remember this?” Maggie must see the look and adds, “I don’t expect you to remember all of this right now. Just follow along with the others. Now, let’s get you some food, then I’ll show you the bunk house.” The guards return from dropping Katniss’s things off. They unshackle Katniss, and leave her in Maggie’s care.

After supper, Katniss is shown to the bunkhouse. It’s a simple structure with two sets of bunk beds lining both walls, and windows in between each set. In the back are two bathrooms, each with showers, sinks, and toilets. The men’s washroom is on the right, the women’s on the left. There are back doors on both sides, just outside of each washroom. There are guards who keep watch around the bunkhouse while the “ranch hands” are in for the night.

At supper, Katniss noticed there were about four men here and three women. As she looks around the bunkhouse now, she sees that the men keep to the right side, the women to the left. Katniss finds her bunk is closest to the front door. She’s been given the bottom bed. Each bunk has a set of drawers on either end of the beds.

As soon as she’s finished putting her clothes away, she washes up, and gets into bed. She lays with her back to the rest of the room, hoping sleep will soon overtake her. “The sooner I get to sleep, the sooner I’ll wake up, the sooner this whole ordeal will be over,” she thinks.

Her bunk mates try to make conversation, but Katniss isn’t interested. She just wants to do her time and be done. She’s tired of having no control over her life, so the sooner these next five years go by, the better.
District 12- It's a New Day

Chapter Summary

Katniss is back in 12.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Katniss lays on the floor while Sae approaches, like she would a small animal in distress. “There, there now girly. You’re home now. It’s all over. You’re safe and home.”

It takes some time, but Katniss responds, “Really?”

“Yes, girl, really. Now. Let’s get you cleaned up and settled back in. I had word you were being released soon, just didn’t know exactly when. All top-secret stuff, you know,” she winks at Katniss. “Your house is yours. It’s clean and there’s food in the pantry and the fridge. Take your things upstairs and put them away. Breakfast will be ready by the time you get back down here.”

Katniss takes her time going through the house. It’s almost as if she’s re-acquainting herself with everything. She notices her father’s coat is hanging on a chair, her parents wedding photo is on the mantle. Where’s my bow?

Sae calls out, almost as if she knows what Katniss is thinking, “Package from District 13 arrived for you the other day. All of your things should be there. Well, all but your bow. The authorities had to confiscate that.”

Oh yeah, Katniss thinks. Wouldn’t do to have a murderer with a bow and arrow…

She wonders about this. She knows she is allowed in the forest, but what will she do? Hunting had been such an important part of her life before everything happened. It literally saved her life. How will I cope?


She picks up her satchel and heads upstairs. Her room is the same as it ever was, but she notices the smell before she even sees it. A rose.

For the second time today (or was it the third? She’s already lost count), panic sets in. The sweat is the first thing she notices, then the heart palpitations, and the roaring in her ears. She rushes over to the dresser where she sees it. In the middle of a dried flower arrangement, one perfect white rose. She feels as if it is mocking her, I may be dead, but you’ll never get away from me!

Katniss picks up the vase, runs to the kitchen, and throws its contents into the fire. Looking down, she notices the vase in her hands. She’s holding on to it so tightly that when she throws it, it smashes into the wall and shatters into thousands of tiny pieces.

“Well girly, you sure do know how to make an entrance.” Sae says as she calmly picks up the broom to sweep the floor. “Let me guess, you don’t like flowers?”

“Roses,” is all Katniss says. She turns and heads back up the stairs.

The roaring in her ears has stopped and she can breathe easier again. She begins unpacking. How long? How long and I supposed to live like this?

“You’ve got to keep going Katniss,” Maggie once told her. “Too many people died for you to just give up. What would your sister want? What about the others? The other Victors? You know how many died in this war? Are you just going to quit?”

With that pep talk in mind, Katniss leaves her satchel and goes down to the kitchen for breakfast.

After Sae leaves, Katniss spends the day reacquainting herself with her house. She wanders through the rooms noticing little details that she had forgotten, how her mother’s bed had the same quilt that she’d shared with her husband all those years ago, and the basket of yarn and knitting needles her mother had left. Katniss wonders if she should phone her mother to find out if she wants these things? It’s been so long though, if she wanted them, wouldn’t she have already gotten them?

Sae has left a list of phone numbers in case Katniss needs to get ahold of anyone. At the top of the list is her mother’s number. With a sigh, Katniss dials the number. It rings two times.

“Hello?” says the voice on the other end of the line.

“Mom?” Katniss chokes out.

“Oh Katniss! Katniss! Oh!” It seems as if those are the only words her mother can say.

They sit there, on opposite ends of the line, crying into their phones. Once they pull themselves together, her mother goes on to tell her how proud she is, how happy she is Katniss is home. Katniss wonders if her mother will ever come to 12 to visit her? She’s not sure, there’s so much history there, and she’s so busy in 4 getting the hospital all set up. But Katniss can phone her anytime she needs to.

“Well?” she sighs. She doesn’t know if she’s surprised at her mother’s answer, or disappointed, or relieved. She’s thinks it’s a combination of all three.

“Is there anything here you need? Your wedding photo? Your quilt?”

“No Katniss. You keep them.”
Once again Katniss isn’t sure how she feels about this. Her mother’s life has definitely moved on in the five years since the war. She supposes it’s natural. She also supposes it is time for her life to move on as well.

“Well then, good bye mom. Call when you can. I’ll try calling you too.” Katniss says, pretty sure she means it.

When evening comes, Katniss finds herself sitting in the living room looking out of the front window. She sees the people from Victor’s Village coming home from their time in town. She doesn’t, however, see one person come home. She wonders if Peeta is here in 12, or if he went somewhere else after the war? Maybe he went to 7 to be near Johanna. She assumes he isn’t in 4, or her mother would have said something. Katniss pulls herself away from the window and heads on up to bed.

The next morning, Katniss is startled awake by the sound of knocking. Where am I? What’s that noise? What’s going on? Oh yes, she’s been back in 12, has been for about 24 hours now, by the look of the sunlight coming in the window. It’s then that Katniss notices the trembling in her body. Her dream must have been a doozy, her whole body is tense and she just now begins to relax her muscles. It’s been so long since her brain truly relaxed enough in order to have a good night’s sleep that she truly doesn’t remember what it’s like.

She hears the knocking again and shakes her head. No one has knocked on her door in over five years. She has always had to accessible 24/7. She hasn’t had the luxury of privacy. Has she ever? She’s not sure.

The knocking comes a third time. Oh right! Answer that! She creeps down the stairs and peaks out the window. It’s not Sae. It’s not Haymitch. So who is it? She throws open the door with a questioning look.

It’s a boy, he looks a bit in awe, and a bit intimidated.

“Well?”

“Oh! Right! I have a letter here for you Ms. Everdeen.”

A confused look comes across her face. Who would be sending her a letter? Whoever it is, she doesn’t think it will be good news. She takes the letter and closes the door.

As it turns out, it’s a letter from the office of her parole officer. She’s to report to the Justice Building at 10:00 this morning. She glances at the clock. 8 AM. Well, at least they gave me some notice?

She sighs, and then goes into the kitchen for breakfast. It seems as if Greasy Sae has been there. She’s left some fresh fruit and bread. The kettle is still warm, so Katniss goes about making herself some tea to drink with the food. After her breakfast she goes upstairs to get ready for the day.

She looks around the room again. The bed and dressers are in the same place they’ve always been, the bathroom on one wall, and the walk-in closet next to it. She wonders what she’ll wear today? Should she look in the closet? Not today. She doesn’t think she can bear to. It will only remind her of Cinna and she doesn’t need to go down that black hole before her appointment. She abruptly turns and goes into the bathroom, stripping off her nightshirt, and stepping into the shower.

Showers in 10 at the ranch were like the showers in her old school. A line of spigots that you took turns standing under. If you were first, there was hot water. If you were last, you rushed through a cold shower. For Katniss, showers in 10 were always cold.

Katniss stands under the shower, reveling in the hot water and the nice soap. After five years, she’s forgotten how nice it is to feel this clean. It brightens her mood and gives her the confidence that she knows she’ll need when she goes to town today.

Town. If Katniss had her own way, she’d never leave her house. But she’s a convicted criminal. She doesn’t get to have her own way.

Resolutely, Katniss turns off the water, steps out of the shower, and dries herself off.

What will she wear? She’s worn those blues jeans and button down tops for so long they’ve become a comfort to her, something she can rely on. Since she’s not up to exploring the closet, she opens her satchel, pulls out a clean pair of jeans and a shirt, and readies herself for her day.

Once the clothes are on, she thinks about braiding her hair. It’s long enough again to do that, but she decides against it. She’s pretty confident word has gotten out that she’s back again. The last thing she wants is to be noticed, so she leaves it down and heads out.

The walk to town is uneventful. As she walks by Haymitch’s house she hears the honking of geese. Odd, but ok. There are more people living in Victor’s Village, she can’t help but notice. The houses look lived in. It’s no longer a ghost town. She sees toys scattered on one yard, a vegetable garden in another. It looks settled here. She’s not sure how she feels about that.

The woods look so inviting.

She passes people on the road. No one says anything, other than the occasional, “Hey.” She sees some mother’s hold their children a little closer, and some people just stare at her. Katniss chooses to keep her gaze down and ignore them.
The woods seem to beckon to her.

She gets to the Justice Building and checks in at the front desk. She’s asked to take a seat, and as she’s been trained these past few years, she does so without thought or question. She takes the time to look around. It seems like a typical building. Not nearly as grand as anything in the Capitol, not even as ornate as the old Justice Building was. It’s a boring building, constructed for efficiency over grandeur.

She wonders who the mayor is, but that only brings thoughts of Madge, which she shuts down right away. Wouldn’t do to be emotional right now. She thinks about all of the changes going on in Panem, all of the districts rebuilding, the freedoms slowly being reinstated. She wonder how she’ll fit into this new world order.

Again, the woods call to her.

Finally, she’s called in to her parole officer’s office. She’s shocked to find she recognizes him.

“Katniss!” He says enthusiastically. “Welcome back! Welcome home!”

He says that like he means it. Katniss thinks.

“Hello Thom,” is what she says. “You look well.” And she means it.

“Let’s get first things settled. Now that you’re back, there are a few things we need to cover. Some basic rules that, if you follow, we’ll all get along a lot better.”

Rules, she thinks. If I’ve learned anything, it’s to follow the rules. “Yes,” is what she says.

“Well, to begin with, for the first little bit at least, I’m going to need you to check in twice a day. You can call, no need to come to my office. Call by 10 in the morning and by 8 at night.”

OK, she could do that.

“Then, I need to remind you that you are ineligible for employment for the time being. Your Victors earnings should more than cover your needs.”

It’s true. She was able to keep what she’d earned after her first games, and while the new earnings aren’t nearly what they were, the new government decided that those Victors who are still left had earned something. So, each month they all receive a stipend. While Katniss was incarcerated, that money went to the Ranch and the justice system. Now that she’s back home, she will begin receiving it herself.

Thom goes on to tell her that she will be getting hers once a month, and then he hands her a check. She has no idea what to do with it, and Thom, seeing the fear and confusion in her face, says, “Talk to Haymitch. He’ll help.”


“OK,” she is what she tells Thom.

“Well, that’s covered,” Thom says as he checks off his list. “Next up, no weapons, no hunting.”

This isn’t unexpected.

“However, you are free to go into the woods. Those are no longer off-limits to you. The only expectation is that I receive that phone call at the end of the day, so no camp outs.”

She supposes that it’s more than she should expect, and that she should be grateful. “Thank you,” she mumbles.

“Katniss,” Tom says as he stops to look at her. “A lot in 12 has changed, but a lot has stayed the same. Most of us returned when we could, and there are a lot of new faces. I know it must be overwhelming to you, so don’t be a stranger. I’d like to be your friend. I’d like you to feel comfortable. Yes, you have restrictions, but you do have freedom.

“Also, I have the name of a counselor I’m going to give you. Her name is Anya. You need to check in with her. Talk to her,” and he hands her a little card with Anya’s name and number.

“She’s a great listener, she’ll help you. I mean it,” Thom stands up and heads towards the door.

“Use this time, while you can’t work, to relax and get comfortable in 12 again,” he says compassionately.

“Don’t be a stranger, Katniss.” He shakes her hand, and with that, she’s dismissed.

She finds herself on the steps of the Justice Building. The early afternoon sun feels good on her skin. As she looks around, she tries to find a familiar face, even just a friendly face. She supposes that if she’s to live here, she might as well try. She notices a building with kids running around.

Must be the school. Is that Delly? Looks like Delly might be a teacher? Humm. Interesting.

Across the way, behind the town buildings, where the mines used to stand, she notices a new, larger structure. She realizes that must be the new medicine plant. Everything looks so new, so clean, so different.

She thinks she hears the woods calling louder.

Then she sees it. The bakery. Mellark’s written in fancy letters. She’d know that artwork.
anywhere.

As she’s looking, out the front door comes a beautiful young woman, about her age. She can see that she has lovely brown hair that flows down her back in soft waves. She’s a little taller than Katniss, nicely proportioned, with smooth, clear skin. This girl is laughing and talking animatedly to her companion. He listens to what she says with rapt attention, laughing along with her like he hasn’t a care in the world.

He glances over at Katniss and stares. She’d know those blue eyes anywhere. Peeta. Looking healthy and happy. Peeta. He turns and looks at Katniss with both shock and recognition. “Katniss??”

And she turns and runs into those woods that have been beckoning her all day.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all of you for the reads, kudos, and reviews. And thanks to Titania522 for her beta skills!
I am not a professional writer, nor do I have any aspirations to be one. I am a Kindergarten teacher who had an idea: What if Katniss hadn't been sent back to 12 right away? What if she was convicted instead. Thank you to all of you who have read, reviewed, and left kudos. To know that you are interested in this little story thrills me to no end.

Thank you to my three girls out there who listened while I “cried on their shoulders” last week! And, as always, to Tia tries522 for being the most supportive beta. I might not have said this earlier, but also thanks to Suzanne Collins for giving us Katniss Everdeen.

We are in District 10 for this chapter.

Katniss wakes up to evil glares from her bunkmates, like she has every morning since she arrived in District 10. She doesn’t really care though. She just goes about her routine. She washes her face, gets ready for her day, and heads to breakfast.

As she walks into the big house, she hears quiet voices. It sounds as if someone is upset and the other is just trying to keep them calm. Every so often she hears her name mentioned.

She puts her head down and continues into the dining room, lining up to serve herself breakfast. Maggie and one of her bunkmates (she thinks his name is John) are in the middle of a discussion. Once they notice her, Maggie moves them into another room. Katniss, however, notices the angry glares that the others are throwing her way.

Seems as if the ranch has it’s own “Mockingjay Problem.”

“I’m telling you, Maggie, if you don’t do something about that girls screaming, I will!” she overhears.

“Now John, you know what will happen to you if something happens to that girl.”

“Then do something. Because we all need our sleep, and we aren’t getting it with her in the bunkhouse!” At that, John stomps out of the house, screen door slamming, and heads toward the barn.

Later, after the workday is over, and the supper dishes are cleaned, Maggie pulls Katniss aside.

“Sorry girl, but we’ve had a change of plans,” she explains kindly. “Now, you’ve not done anything wrong; but we’re moving you to the solitary confinement room.”

Seeing the confused look on Katniss’s face, Maggie continues, “You’ll not be locked in, you still can come and go just as you would if you were in the regular bunkhouse. We just think it will be better for all involved if you had your own room.”

It’s not that Katniss cares, really. She has no intentions of making friends here. If she didn’t make friends easily while growing up in 12, why would she bother now? Still, something about this situation stings.

Even while she’s in custody they don’t know what to do with her. No one ever seems to know what to do with her.

She moves her meager belongings into the solitary bunkhouse. It’s a small, one room out-building not far from the main bunkhouse. It looks almost like the sheds they have in Victor’s Village that house the tools they use to take care of the properties. Windows are on 2 of the 3 walls, with one in the door. There is plenty of natural lighting. Of course, there are also bars on all of the windows.

Up against the back wall is a small bunk with a window above it. In the comer, is a sink with cold water, and a medicine cabinet above it. In the cabinet is a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a hairbrush. The door to the cabinet is stainless steel, so she can see a reflection, but it can’t be broken.

A small toilet stands near by. There is no curtain, but she supposes that since she’s the only one in here, she doesn’t really need it. As long as she closes her door before she uses the toilet, she should be fine.

Katniss goes about moving her things into the footlocker at the end of her bed and looks around her new “home”. Now she can scream as loud as she wants. No one will hear her. No one will be woken up. No one will come to comfort her. Just like usual.

Once again, she’s reminded of Peeta, and the steadiness of his arms. Of course, Snow took care of that…

She blinks, shakes her head, and tells herself to shape up. Won’t do to have those thoughts. She lies down and looks out the window. Won’t do at all.

The next morning the sun seeps in. Katniss jolts awake after another nightmare, and sits up suddenly. Still alive, she thinks as she falls back on to the bed, covering her face with her hands.

She’s so weary. Why do they have me here? What’s the meaning? Is there one? She’s sworn she will never be a piece in anyone’s game ever again, but here she is. Why?

Prim is dead. Her friendship with Gale is irrevocably broken- they’ve both changed so much. And then there’s Peeta. Good, gentle, constant Peeta. He hates her now, she’s sure of it. The way he refused to look at her during the Victor’s meeting, his eyes flitting away as soon as she tried to make a connection told her that.

Then why did he stop me from taking the Nightlock pill? She has no idea. Why would he? Why does he care? Some questions just can’t be answered right now.

She thinks about her own death. What would they do? What could they do to stop her? Perhaps she’ll use her time here to figure that out. Surely they wouldn't care if the Mockingjay died. If they cared at all, why would I be here?
Suddenly, her door bangs open, "Ms. Everdeen. You're missing breakfast," says a man with a gun in his hand. "This won't do. Up! Up! Let's go. Can't do a full day's work on an empty stomach."

Katniss is forced out of bed, forced to get dressed, forced to get ready, and forced to eat. She has no choices, no rights. She is, after all, a bird in a cage.

She pulls herself out of bed. She looks at her reflection in the door of the medicine cabinet. The hair that was singed is beginning to grow out. She does her best to plait what hair she has in order to get it out of the way. She then heads to the main house for breakfast.

She keeps to herself as she goes about her daily chores. Her first assignment is to muck out the horse stalls. She has no idea what she's doing. "Don't worry Mockingjay," the guard sneers. "Practice makes perfect!"

Katniss scowls at him as he stands there and stare.

"You can resist all you want, missy. But your job is to clean out these stables. You will clean them. Now, how long it takes is up to you. But they will be clean before bed tonight." And he taps his gun as a reminder that the choice is gone.

The guard does give her more detailed instructions, and Katniss learns, through trial and error, how to clean the stable. It only took her until dinnertime to figure this out. Quick learner, she is.

After dinner she's given the chore to groom the horses. Again, the guard instructs her on what to do. It's important to keep them well and take care of them. These horses are the lifeblood of the ranch. They aren't like the horses that pulled the chariots in the Tribute parades. Those horses were fancy, they almost seemed too delicate. These are workhorses. They pull wagons, help move the implements from one end of the ranch to the other, help with the haying. The other ranch hands use them for a variety of tasks.

"Will I be riding them ever?" She asks.

"You'll just be keeping quiet and doing your work. You'll find that will be best for you," her guard answers. No, she decides. Not riding them, just taking care of them.

Over the next few days Katniss develops her routine. Gather the eggs, clean out the stalls, weed the kitchen garden, feed the chickens, do any menial work that needs to be done around the barns.

It's easy enough, even if it is monotonous. Once she proves she can do the chores, the guard leaves her be.

She finds the horses and the chickens are good listeners. Sometimes shequietly sings to them. That's what caged birds do, right? They sing?

But she only sings to the animals, never loud enough for others to hear. She knows she's being watched, and she doesn't want to give anyone too much information about her inner life.

As the weeks go by, she finds her own rhythm. It's soothing really. Up at the crack of dawn, get dressed, breakfast, work, dinner, work, supper. She helps with the food and the dishes when it's her turn. After supper she might stroll around the barnyard, then head over to the bunkhouse to shower. The water is always cold, but the soap and shampoo do their best to clean her. After her shower she dries off, dresses, and heads back to her own bunkhouse. It's ready for bed, and lights out.

Cook has discovered she's handy at plucking the chickens, so she's given that job too.

She says hello when necessary, listens to the others, answers when needed, keeps her head down, and minds her own business. It's a simple existence.

At night, when she finds herself alone, she thinks of people she used to know. Where is Gale? What happened to him? What about Peeta? Is he home? How is her mother holding up after Prim? Is Haymitch sober again, or back on the bottle? All of these thoughts swirl around in her head. Do they care about her? What has happened? Will she ever find out?

When it all gets too much, Prim comes to her in her dreams, "Keep going Katniss! Please? For me? Keep going." Those are the dreams she likes the best. They give her hope and strength.

All too often though, her dreams are about loss: her father, Prim, her mother, Peeta, Gale, Finnick, Boggs, Madge. The list goes on and on.

When she has those dreams she barely makes it out of bed. What's the point anyway? Send me back to the Capitol, she thinks.

But she knows that's really not an option.

What would Haymitch say? "Stay alive." So that's what she does.

Each day she gets up and goes about her routine. Routine, routine, routine.
He’s not wrong. Katniss is trying to not get so overwhelmed. Sometimes it frustrates her that so much information.

“Alright, apparently I’ve been given the task to help you set up your bank account. Also, Thom feels this is something you need to know as well,” Haymitch says.

Katniss sighs, “What are you here for?”

“Nice knocking Haymitch,” Katniss responds, happy to discover she hasn’t totally lost her fire.

“Well, well, well! Look who’s home.”

Relief floods her as she sees it’s just Greasy Sae making all the noise. She forgets about the shoe, the banging and clanging coming from the kitchen. Finally, she realizes she’s not alone in the house. Instinctively she sits still and listens to the bunging and clanging coming from the kitchen. Katniss grabs the first thing she finds, one of her favorite knives.

“Um, thanks.”

Katniss sits and breathes and takes it all in. How many times did she dream about this place? How many times did she try to will herself here, just by thinking about it? Now she’s here. These are her woods, her ways. She thinks she feels a little more strength seeping into her weary soul.

She sits and listens to the bunging and clanging coming from the kitchen. It’s not bad. She likes the noise. It makes her feel alive.

Sae carries on in the kitchen, making what looks like breakfast, and perhaps some other meals. “I thought I’d cook up some food for you. Give you some to stock up on.”

“Um, yeah. Sure.” Katniss replies. She’s fine with it, though she knows her reply is a bit lackluster.

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“Um, thanks.”

As Sae finishes up in the kitchen, Katniss sits down to the breakfast. When she finishes, she wanders outside to have a look around her place. In the back, she notices someone has started a garden. A small smile crosses her face. She did like tending the kitchen garden back in 10, and she hopes this new one will be just as productive.

She wanders around the outside of the house. The back porch looks inviting, with the porch swing and tables. She remembers sitting out here with Prim some evenings, listening to the cicadas, watching the lightning bugs, drinking lemonade. She thinks she might enjoy this again.

Later, after Sae has left, and after Buttercup has gone out on a hunt, Katniss is still home. As she’s sitting on that rock, she’s able to think about all she’s been through. She thinks she may have buttercup to thank for that. For some reason, having him with her calms her, like the horses in District 10. Somehow these animals can sense what she needs before she can.

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As she heads home, she notices all of the life teeming around her. There’s food here, life here.

She’s sitting at her old meeting place in the woods. The same place she’d go to meet up with Gale. Of course, Gale won’t come now. She’s known for a while that he’s gone up in the world. Maggie let it slip once, told her how Gale was working as the Head of Defense in 2. Maggie also let her know Gale wanted to make sure she was OK. It helped Katniss then, made her feel less alone.

This is her new life now. Once a month she gets a “stipend” from the government. Haymitch is supposed to help with that! Haymitch? It’s not that she doesn’t trust him, it’s just that she wonders how much of a drunken stupor he’s in, and how will he climb out of it to help her.

Katniss spends the better part of the afternoon just sitting on that rock. Sitting and breathing and coming to terms with this new life she’s been given. For so long she’s been told what to think, where to go, what to do, that she’s now overwhelmed. Sitting on that rock is the best she can do, really the only thing she can do, at this moment.

She sits and listens to the bunging and clanging coming from the kitchen. It’s not bad. She likes the noise. It makes her feel alive.

Sae carries on in the kitchen, making what looks like breakfast, and perhaps some other meals. “I thought I’d cook up some food for you. Give you some to stock up on.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Good morning, Sae,” says, slightly embarrassed for dropping the shoe like that.

“I’ve gotten into the habit of stopping by to feed the cat and look after the place. I thought I might continue a bit longer, till you’re settled in. If that’s OK, of course.”

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As she heads home, she notices all of the life teeming around her. There’s food here, life here.

This is where she belongs, in these woods, in District 12.

Walking up to her porch, Katniss notices that orange ball of fur. Buttercup. The sight of him fills her with longing, and even with love. Buttercup reminds her of Prim, reminds her of her life before everything. As she reaches down to pet him, he scratches a bit but lets her approach. He lets her pet him, and in that moment they finally make a truce.

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The next morning, Katniss wakes up and realizes that same soft ball of fur is curled up at her side.

Somehow the two have decided to put their old grievances aside, having realized they are all each other has left.

She also realizes how refreshed she feels. Not tense or shaky. Not hoarse from screaming. Must have had a good night’s sleep. It’s been awhile. She guesses she may have Buttercup to thank for that. For some reason, having him with her calms her, like the horses in District 10. Somehow these animals can sense what she needs before she can.

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He’s not wrong. Katniss is trying to not get so overwhelmed. Sometimes it frustrates her that so much...
many people have so much information on her, and no one seems to think she needs to know it. She’s hoping, now that she’s back in the District, that that will change. She hasn’t been as free to ask questions for so long…

Haymitch sits down and proceeds to tell her how Maggie made reports back to Paylor, who in turn reported to Gale. He had a lot of interest in her case. Seems he wanted to make sure she was getting all that she needed. He also wanted to make sure she was protected—that she is protected still.

She never thought about that. How Gale might still be interested in her well-being, even after everything that has happened between them.

Haymitch continues to tell her how her mother received monthly reports from Gale, and Thom, as the District Officer, received them, then passed them on to Haymitch.

“What about Peeta?” Katniss asks, half hoping he was informed, but half afraid he wouldn’t care.

“At first we weren’t sure how much to share with Peeta. It all seemed so loaded, you know? We knew he still suffered from some flashbacks, and we didn’t want to set him off. But when he first came back, he was so determined.”

“Determined? How?” Katniss can’t help but ask.

“It was like he had one mission—to get his life back.

“But then, when I actually stopped to see what Peeta was doing, it all became clear. He was building his life back for sure, anyone watching could see that. It was like he set out to prove himself. He wasn’t Peeta Mellark, Hijack Victim anymore. He was Peeta Mellark, a man reclaiming the life that was taken from him.

“But there were more subtle things. How he planted those primrose bushes, and took care of them. How he made sure your house was kept up, and the garden was planted. It was Peeta who hired Sae to take care of the inside of the house while he took care of the outside. Peeta took care of Buttercap, here, not at his house.

“When I stopped to look at Peeta, I realized not only was he working on getting his own life back, he wanted to make sure you had a home to come back to as well.”

This sets her back. Peeta did this? But what about that girl? Peeta must have done what he did out of loyalty to me, she thinks. It sounds like he’s reclaimed what he lost, and wants to help me for old time’s sake. She’s not sure how she feels. Empty is the first word that comes to her mind.

“Anyway,” Haymitch continues, “we decided Peeta should know how things were with you too, so he was allowed that information.”

“Did he ask? Did it bother him?”

“He did ask. Every day he would ask if I’d heard from you, or at least about you. That was one of the reasons we decided he should be informed. That, and the fact that he was just as invested in your life as anyone of us. When we first included him on the reports, we wouldn’t see him for a day after. I can’t tell you why, that’s not my information to share. But he seemed so determined to keep up with your situation.”

Katniss thinks about this. Peeta is such an enigma to her right now. She hasn’t seen him since the day of the Victor’s vote and the assassination. She has no idea what he thinks about her. From what Haymitch says, he cares for her on some level, but what kind? Confusing. It’s all so confusing.

“OK then,” she continues, “Who else knows?” One thing she is sure of—she doesn’t want the whole District knowing about her life.

“No one. Seriously, only Paylor, Gale, your mother, Thom, me, and Peeta. We were all sworn to secrecy. Not even Plutarch knew. Of course, he knows you’re out now, so I thought I’d give you that heads up.”

“Gee, thanks!” Katniss says with a smirk, although she is relieved. “So, while I’m in custody, and given hardly any information, you all have had weekly updates about me!”

“Yes we have. And don’t get all upset over that. You know the terms of your incarceration. You’re lucky we had that information.”

Katniss ponders this. She supposes it’s better that they knew something, rather than no one knowing anything. Still, she feels light years behind everyone else. She’s not sure what she knows in comparison to what others know. She is glad, however, that those who know were sworn to secrecy. That gives her a feeling of confidence. She knows these people, and she trusts them all.

You can’t undo five years in one conversation, but it is a start.

“So, like I said at first,” Haymitch concludes, “let’s go into town and get that bank account set up. Then maybe you can check in and meet Anya, set up an appointment.”

Katniss thinks Haymitch is there more to make sure she sees Anya than to set up the bank account, but she goes along with it anyway.

As they head into town, Katniss reverts to her typical internal reclusive self. At the bank, she gives out only the information she must in order to set up her Victor’s Account, intrigued to find out how much is already in there. She supposes, once she begins to purchase her own supplies, it will soon dwindle.

She goes to meet Anya and sets up an appointment for another day. She’s nice enough, so maybe it won’t be so bad. Talking to Meggie always seemed to help. Afterwards, Katniss and Haymitch head back home.

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What Katniss doesn’t notice though is that all the eyes of District 12 watch her:

Thom, through his office window, sees Katniss with Haymitch. He’s pleased to see her go to the bank and then stop by to meet Anya. Thom really does want to see her happy and whole. For so long he’s watched her struggle. First when she was a kid, then in the Games, then the war and after. He wants her to have her own life for once, and he will do what he can to make that happen.

Katniss doesn’t see the eyes of the other natives of 12, who see her just as Thom does. They see this girl who deserves so much after everything that was taken from her. Wishing only the best for
...but knowing that it has to be Katniss who reclaims her own life.

She doesn't see the eyes of the newer residents of 12. Some look at her in awe, some with suspicion. But none of them know her. They know about her, sure, but they have no experience, so they keep their distance. They stay wary.

She doesn't see the eyes of a little girl who watches her intensely, a little girl who has heard stories of this “Mockingjay”, this brave person who led a revolution. But the little girl doesn't see a mockingjay- why doesn't she have wings? She wonders if she even sings. What the girl does see is something others might not see. She sees someone who needs a friend.

Katniss doesn't see the eyes of Peeta Mellark, who watches her from the shop window. Peeta, who sees the 11 year old girl that was crouched down under the apple tree, near the pig’s pen. He sees that starving girl again, and he knows what she needs- a loaf of bread, and a little help. Peeta knows this Mockingjay. He knows she might be a little skittish right now. So he wonders how he can help her, how he can be there for her. She's come home and now is his chance to protect her, just like they've always done.

But there is one person in 12 who isn't looking at Katniss. She's looking at Peeta, and she knows. In that instant Rhea, the head of the Community Home, the beautiful girl with the lovely brown hair that flows down her back, knows that as friendly as she and Peeta have been over these past few years, Peeta has never looked at her the way he's looking at Katniss. Peeta is Rhea's friend, of that she has no doubt. But now she knows Peeta will never be anything more to her than her friend.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks to my wonderful beta Titania522- always questioning me and giving the best suggestions. Thanks to you, the readers. And thanks to Suzanne Collins for Katniss Everdeen.
Katniss sits on her bunk, staring out the window into the distance. It’s her favorite time of the day here—free time. She doesn’t have to listen to anyone, or follow anyone else’s instructions. She’s free to sit and think. She’s just gotten out of that cold shower, her hair is still wet as she combs it out.

She misses home, but at the same time is fascinated with the surrounding land in District 10. It’s so flat here compared to District 12. Back in 12 she saw mountains, trees, hills and valleys. It’s amazing how far into the distance she can see in 10. She never realized you could do that.

It’s also dusty and brown here, not green and lush like her woods back home. It’s this that makes her think she’s not sure how long she’s been here. It’s more than days or weeks, but she doesn’t know how many months. Everything just blends in together, like the brown dirt that gets into her clothes and hair.

Her hair. It’s still so uneven, chopped in weird places because of the bombs and the burns. She does notice that it’s starting to grow back in those bald places though. She thinks something about this may be significant, she’s not sure. But one thing she’s confident of, she hates her hair.

Wearing a braid was something she did for convenience sake. Her mother was the talented one with the hair. Katniss merely put it up because it kept it out of her clothes and hair.

But what is it now? Parts of it were singed, parts burned off. It’s uneven and unruly, and she wants it gone. She wants it gone now.

She looks around her room—bunk, a toilet, a shiny piece of metal for a mirror, a small sink, a shelf with a brush and a toothbrush. Nothing here can take care of her problem. Of course they won’t let her have scissors. She wonders what she can do and decides to see if Maggie can help.

So she gets up and heads to the main house, avoiding people on the way. No one ever seems especially inclined to talk to her, so this is one task she’s pretty good at. She enters the house, and turns towards the office, where Maggie sits going over something at the desk.

“Sorry to bother you, Maggie,” she says quietly as she knocks on the door.

Maggie jumps, startled at the quiet voice.

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“Whatever for Katniss? How can I help you?”

“It’s my hair. I need…” she falters and takes a deep breath. “I need some help.”

“Now, that’s something I’ve been waiting to hear from you since you got here. Sit down. Let’s see what we can do.”

She isn’t sure what Maggie means by this. Has she been waiting for her to ask for help? Or waiting for her to ask about her hair? She’s pretty sure Maggie means asking for help, but she doesn’t really want to admit to that either.

Katniss sits on a stool, impassive, as Maggie goes to another part of the house and returns with the scissors and a comb. Maggie stands behind her, and calmly smooths the knots from her hair.

There is something about her spirit that soothes Katniss. It’s in the way she moves around, with authority and confidence, yet not pushy. It gives Katniss the confidence to ask how Maggie got into the position she’s in now, as “matron” of this work ranch.

“Well, my family owned this land before the Dark Days. When The Capitol took charge of Panem, they took charge of all privately owned farms and ranches, but “allowed” our family to stay on and work for the ‘benevolent Capitol’, ” she says with a touch of sarcasm. “Once the war ended, I reclaimed my ownership. As a favor to the new government I volunteered this ranch to be used for the next 5 years as a disappearing place. A place where people who needed to “disappear” for awhile could go.”

“Is that why I’m here?” Katniss wonders out loud. “Did they want me to disappear?”

“In a way, yes.” Maggie responds matter-of-factly.

“But why would they want me to disappear? Why wouldn’t they just kill me, after all of the trouble I’ve caused?” This is a question that has plagued her since she came.

“Kill you? What purpose would that serve?” Maggie scoffs.

“Well, you’d take care of the ‘Mockingjay Problem’ really easy then?” Katniss says, less confident than before.

“You don’t know, do you?” Maggie responds. “The lengths this country has gone for you.”

Katniss stares at her, a little shocked, and shakes her head no.

“Well then, you just sit tight, Missy. There are a few things you need to learn.”

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“Well then, you just sit tight, Missy. There are a few things you need to learn.”

And Maggie begins to tell her, at great length, just what ‘this’ is all about. She tells her how people in 13 wanted her dead for killing Coin. People in the Capitol wanted her dead too, but for a very different reason, for causing all of this trouble. There were many in 1 and 2, and even some in 4 would have been happy to help carry out her execution. Even people in the other districts thought a ‘dead Mockingjay’ might be the best answer to the problem of reunification after the
But, there were other people too. A lot of other people, by the way, that believed in this crazy girl from 12. People who would have followed her anywhere. People who vowed that if the Mockingjay were executed, the war would continue until there was nothing, and no one, left to fight over.

Katniss is taken aback by all of this. It doesn’t shock her that people in 13 or even the Capitol wanted her dead. That was pretty evident. She did help start a war that upset the balance of things in Panem. Then she ended up killing the president of 13, the next president.

The people in 1 and 2 don’t surprise her either. She remembers how District 2 was the last to surrender, the last to give in to the rebels. She thought that most people in 4 might be on her side, but that’s probably due to her friendship with Finnick. It does surprise her that people in other parts of Panem thought her death would help reunify the country.

But it’s the ones who vowed to fight for her that surprise her the most. She has never been one that thought very highly of herself. She’s pretty quick to notice her own faults. But to think that there were enough people in the Districts willing to continue fighting to keep her safe. That silences her.

Maggie goes on to tell her how, during the trial, a compromise was reached. No death for the Mockingjay, but no freedom either. Not yet, at least. In a way, they’ve put her in a cage. She has to live five years in an undisclosed location, guarded, with no outside contact. Five years to learn to be quiet, to follow the rules, to live by common society’s ways.

She knows it’s true. They’ve said this about her all along. She’s a loose cannon. She’s never been one to follow the rules, even when she was a little girl singing those rebellious songs. It was obvious to anyone watching when she went into the arena both times.

How did a girl from the Seam learn to shoot a bow and arrow like that? How did a girl from 12, “where there are no large bodies of water”, learn to swim? Did she ever follow the rules?

“There, all finished.” Maggie says, and shows Katniss her handiwork. “Back in my younger days, we called this a pixie cut. I don’t know why, so don’t ask.” Maggie smiles conspiratorially at her.

No more braid. Not even much hair. She no longer has to worry about keeping it off her face when the sun beats down on her, or out of the way when she’s mucking out the stables. It’s a different look for her, that’s for sure. But sometimes different is good. Sometimes different is what you need to survive.
Chapter Notes

I'd like to thank my beta titania522 for her work on this chapter (and the next). She pushed me to do some hard work, and I think the story is much better for it. So thank you my friend! And YOU, the reader, get to benefit from this (I hope you think you'll benefit), because one chapter has turned into two. I am going to break away from the main set-up of this story, as this is the first of two District 12 chapters in a row. I hope you all enjoy!

Once again, thank you to my readers. Your kudos, subscriptions, and reviews all bring a smile to my face!

And, as always, thank you to Suzanne Collins for giving us Katniss Everdeen.

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District 12 - "The Mockingjay" part 1

“So Katniss,” Anya begins. “Tell me how you’re doing? Have you had any exciting adventures since the last time you were here?”

Anya always begins their sessions this way. Ever since Katniss began meeting with her, she’s felt more and more comfortable. It’s almost like Anya doesn’t take herself too seriously, yet Katniss knows that she is truly interested in her well-being.

“No. No new adventures.” Katniss smiles back. “I wake up, I get ready for the day, call Thom, head to town if I need something, then I go home and get myself ready for the evening. Simple. Kind of boring,” at this her smile falters a bit.

“How does it feel, finally being able to get out and do your own thing?”

“Um… I don’t know.” Katniss takes a deep breath. “It’s like… well… I really hate going anywhere now. I hate town, but I hate staying home too.”

“What do you hate town?”

Katniss doesn’t want to answer this. She doesn’t really like having to look deep inside of herself. She doesn’t want to say how sad she feels when she sees all of the old and new residents getting on with their lives, while she’s just starting hers.

She doesn’t want to tell her how seeing Peeta just leaves her frustrated, because she still doesn’t have the words she thinks she needs in order to speak to him. No real words, at least, beyond “hey” or “thanks” or “how’s it going?”

“So she gives the easiest answer possible. “I don’t like it when people look at me. I didn’t notice it at first. Now it’s all I can see. I hate them staring. I don’t know what they think, and it makes me feel uncomfortable.”

“I think that’s a pretty reasonable reaction, Katniss. No one likes to be stared at.”

“But then, I hate staying home too. It’s so full of everyone and everything that I’ll never have or see again. It’s like it’s haunted, only I see the ghosts during the day, too.”

“What would you do, if this were before the war? Where would you go?”

“The Hob. The Seam. The woods.”

So it’s at the suggestion of Anya that Katniss finds herself in the woods more often than not these days. Anya thinks it will be good for Katniss to get back in touch with that side of her past.

It’s cool in the woods, familiar. Katniss begins to find pieces of herself and her old life there. She wanders her old paths, always watchful of wild animals. She’s not sure if she should be here, so deep in the woods, without protection. She’s not sure she really cares about that, either.

Every time she goes into the woods, Katniss begins to feel a little lighter, a little freer. She finds herself running more, and climbing trees again. It’s almost like she’s remembering the Katniss she was before it all happened. Before her time at Three Heifers Ranch, before the war, the Hunger Games, before her father’s death.

In a way, when she’s in the woods, Katniss feels 10 years old again.

When she talks to Anya about this, the counselor just nods her head and smiles. She knows this is exactly what Katniss needs, and she’s glad to see Katniss is coming to this realization on her own.

One day she comes across a tree trunk that looks familiar. She peers inside and notices something. It’s an old oilcloth wrapped around a stick? Wait! Is it? It is! Carefully, with a huge grin on her face, Katniss reaches in and pulls it out. She’s found another bow and arrows. She remembers that her father left a few around in these woods. Katniss pulls it out, impressed at how well it’s held up in her absence.

Katniss knows legally she’s not allowed to have this “weapon”, but she also can’t help herself. She takes a few practice shots. She may be a little rusty, but it isn’t too long before her old confidence returns.

It can’t hurt to use this in the woods, she reasons. It’s for protection…

It’s a hot day in July when she finds herself at the lake she went to with her father, the one where she learned to swim. She doesn’t even think twice before stripping off her clothes and jumping in the cool water. For this moment in time, she feels happy.

When Katniss begins to gather, she uses her family plant book, afraid she’s forgotten what to look for. Soon though, her old knowledge comes back. She gathers strawberries and tries not to think of Madge. She gathers blackberries and remembers her time with Gale fondly, glad to know all of her old memories don’t haunt her. She finds wild onions, herbs, and even some wild katniss roots.

She’s taken to bringing these home and laying them out or hanging them up for drying. She’s even created a little space in the pantry for this. Little by little, her kitchen starts to look homely.
Katniss begins to experiment with the things she’s gathered in the woods, combined with some of the vegetables she’s harvested from the garden. She remembers her first trip to the Capitol, on that death train that took her to the 74th Games. The food that they were offered was beyond anything she’d ever had growing up in 12. She remembers how she’d think about re-creating those meals here. Now that she’s got so much time on her hands, and the money to spend, she might just try it now.

Her first experiments, while not horrible, and certainly edible, were still not up to what she was hoping they would be. Just as she’s about to give up on her cooking ability, Sae drops by. Katniss allows her to try what she’s made (a vegetable soup with a tomato base and tender strips of beef). Sae is quick to offer advice, and makes arrangements to come back to guide her some more:

“Girl, you’ve gotta hold that knife gently! Like you’re caressing it.” Sae says laughingly one day. “You’re holding it like you would a hammer pounding in a nail. Gentle, gentle…”

Katniss thinks this is ridiculous. Why does it matter how I hold the stupid knife? But she does change her grip, and she notices immediately how much easier it is to handle the food. She grudgingly thanks Sae for her advice.

Next up, she attempts to roast a chicken she’s bought in the market place. Sae helps her hold the carving knife down with oil, carefully placing it in the pan. She prepares a dressing, with just the right amount of summer savory. When the chicken comes out golden, the vegetables crisp, yet tender, and the dressing has the perfect flavor she smiles shyly.

“But what do you think?”

Sae takes a small bite, chewing it carefully, savoring the flavors. “I think, girl, that you’re on the right track. I’d sell this in my stall and make enough to take the day off tomorrow!”

Katniss smiles at the praise. She begins to feel that she might be pretty good at creating things instead of destroying them. It isn’t long before Sae stops by less for instructing and more for the company and the sampling. Katniss has become an excellent cook in her own right.

It starts out so suddenly, that Katniss thinks it must have always been this way. She’s heading out her door, ready for a day in the woods when she notices something on her stoop. A basket filled with baked goods.

Of course, she can’t prove it’s Peeta leaving these, but she’s fairly certain no one else would do this. At first she wants to reject them. Why is he doing this? I don’t need his help. Katniss tries not to get offended.

“Girl, sometimes you’ve just got to get out of your own way and accept hospitality wherever it shows up.” Sae told her the next day. “People like you and they want you to feel welcomed. It’s what neighbors do.”

Katniss had been complaining about the bread, even though she knows it’s ungrateful and foolish. So, she grins and bears it. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t keep thinking of ways to pay him back.

The problem is paying him back would require her to speak to him.

It isn’t so odd to see him around the Village, or even in town on the rare occasions she’s there. He always stops as she walks by, looks her in the eye (really all over), has a wave for her, a bright smile, calls her by name as he says hello. It’s almost like they are in school again, except his eyes don’t flit away like they did back in those days. And he speaks to her.

“Hey Katniss,” Peeta says, a bit shakily, almost as if he’s afraid she’ll run away as soon as she hears him.

“Um, hey Peeta,” Katniss answers back so softly he might not even hear her.

“Nice weather we’re having?”

“Yeah. I um, it’s great…” and with this, she puts her head down and scampers off, feeling so foolish she hides in the woods for a few hours. She goes over their small conversation, beating herself up for not saying anything more. “Weather’s nice Peeta.. Hey Peeta.. Why is he doing this? I don’t need his help. Katniss tries not to get offended.

And it’s at that point that she realizes, no matter how many years have gone by, that it all boils down to the same thing. He gives her bread, and she can’t ever seem to say thank you.

By mid-July, the garden is so full and ready for harvesting, that Katniss decides to forgo a few days in the woods in order to take care of the bounty. In her kitchen pantry she discovered some boxes of mason jars and decides, with the abundance of food, that she should probably can as much as possible for the coming winter.

When Sae stops by to give her pointers on where to begin, Katniss discovers it isn’t as hard as she thought it might be. Washing and sterilizing the jars is therapeutic, with a rhythm she finds soothing. Preparing the vegetables helps her to focus on one thing at a time.

She’s finding she’s pretty good with this domestic stuff. Prim would be so proud of her! That thought alone gives her a sense of pride in what she’s doing.

It isn’t long though before she discovers that between the fresh vegetables in the garden, and the canned food in the cupboard, there is more here than she can eat.

She offers some to Sae, who kindly turns it down, “Thank you kindly Katniss, but I have enough of my own!”

“What am I going to do with all of this? Do you think Haymitch could use some?”

“Oh I’m sure he might take some, but I’d just give him the canned stuff. Otherwise that fresh stuff will rot, and that’s a mess no one wants. Or he’d just give it to those damned geese of his.”

At this Katniss laughs. Those geese seem to be the bane of the neighborhood, but Haymitch doesn’t care. And Katniss knows those geese help ground Haymitch. They give him something to wake up for each day.

It hits her, as she’s thinking about Haymitch, Peeta. I’ll give it to Peeta.

So, later on that afternoon, when she knows Peeta will be in town at the Bakery, she carries a basket full of fresh and canned vegetables and leaves them on his front door step.
This is the second of two parts, so we're still in District 12 for this one. Hope you don't mind :)

As always, thanks to all of you who read and leave comments and kudos.
And thanks to Titania522- who asks the tough questions, and always encourages.
She brings out the best in others, that one does!
And to Suzanne Collins, for giving us Katniss.

Summer progresses and Katniss begins to find more and more comfort in her daily routines. She makes her way home from town, content in a day well spent, and sits on her porch swing, watching the leaves on the trees flutter in the breeze. She thinks about who she was when she returned from District 10 and who she is today. She likes this Katniss much more than that scared, frightened girl who was finally home. But, in a way, she's grateful for that scared girl, because it gives her a touchstone to what she's become.

As she sits there she feels something, or someone, watching her before she sees it. Her old hunter's instincts have returned in full force.

She sees a little girl, about 5 years old peeking out from behind one of the trees nearest her house.

"Hello," Katniss says carefully, not wanting to frighten her. "It's OK, you can come out."

The girl comes out from behind the tree, and cautiously walks up to the porch.

Katniss pats the seat next to her, "You can sit here."

She looks a bit disheveled, but still healthy and well cared for, with her long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, and with a pair of jeans and a pink t-shirt on. She also looks curious. Very curious.

"Who are you?" Katniss asks gently.

"My—my names Janie," the girl replies, trying to sound bold but the stutter gives her nerves away.

"Well, hello Janie," Katniss returns, hoping to put the girl at ease. "My name is Katniss."

"Oh, I know who you are! Everyone knows about you."

"I'm sure they do!" she says a bit ruefully. "How did you get here?"

"I followed you," the girl replies, a bit embarrassed. "I've been watching you."

"Watching me? Why?"

"Because everyone kept talking about "The Mockingjay" and that "The Mockingjay" was back, and I wanted to see one," Janie says quickly. "But mockingjays are birds, and birds have wings. I wanted to see your wings, but you don't have any wings, so now I don't know why they call you that."

"No, I don't have wings," Katniss answers back. "And I haven't been the Mockingjay in a long time. Now I'm just Katniss."

And since she can't help her own curiosity, she adds, "So, what are they saying about me?"

"Well," Janie pauses, thinking of just the right words, "they say you're brave and strong. They say you made our country free, and they say that when you sing, all of the birds stop and listen."

"Who says that?" Katniss scoffs.

"Mr. Peeta says that!"


"How do you know Mr. Peeta?"

"Mr. Peeta tells us stories. He talks to Miss Rhea and Miss Leevy too."

"Who's Miss Rhea?"

Katniss asks, glad to hear that Leevy is back.

"She takes care of us at the home."

Again, her curiosity gets the better of her. "What does she look like?"

"She's so pretty! And she has pretty brown hair too!"

Katniss thinks she knows who Rhea is now. She's confident that she was the young woman talking with Peeta the first time she saw him.

"Do Miss Rhea or Miss Leevy know where you are now? Do they know you're here?"

At this, Janie looks down to the ground. "No, I came after school because I saw you walking through town and I wanted to see your wings."

"Well, now I know I don't have wings…"

"I know," she says sadly.

"We need to get you back. I'll bet they're very concerned about you. Do you know how to get home from here?"

"No ma'am."

Katniss sighs. "How on earth do I explain this?"

"Well, Janie. Let's get you back."
She stands up and Janie follows. Katniss hopes the home is
near the school.

As they walk back to town, Janie instinctively reaches out and grabs Katniss’s hand. It’s been a long time since Katniss has held the hand of a young girl, not since Prim was little. She remembers walking with Prim to school like this all those years ago. It fills Katniss with a sense of warmth.

Janie prattles on about pretty much everything. It’s almost like she’s been saving up all of her words for a time like this. As the walk proceeds, Katniss learns much about Janie. Her favorite color? Pink. Her favorite food? Mr. Peeta’s cheese buns. Her teacher at school? Miss Delly. Her favorite subject? Reading.

By the time they get to town, Katniss is almost tired just from listening to the girl go on and on. But she also enjoyed spending this time with her. She thinks she’d like to be able to spend more time with Janie. Something about this tells Katniss being around Janie would be a good thing for both of them.

Once they get to town, Janie remembers how to get to the Home. "I know where I am now! It's just over there, by the school!"

As they approach, Katniss can feel the tension in the air. It seems Janie has been missed. She wonders if she’ll be blamed for her disappearance. Will she get in trouble? Will I get in trouble? She begins to get nervous, afraid she’s broken some rule.

Once they near the Home, the front door is flung open and Rhea (at least Katniss assumes that’s who it is) comes running out. “Janie! Where have you been? We’ve been looking all over for you! You can’t just go away like that! We were all so worried!”

It’s only then that Rhea looks up and notices Katniss standing there. “Oh! Miss Everdeen!”

Katniss swallows and says, “Sorry. Janie followed me home. I brought her back as soon as I could.”

“Oh, thank you!” Rhea replies, then turns her attention back to the little girl. “Janie, whatever possessed you to do a thing like that? Why would you not come straight home after school?”

At this, Janie realizes how worried Miss Rhea must have been. “I… I…” And she begins to sob, “I just wanted to see the Mockingjay!!!!” At this, she flings her arms around Rhea’s neck.

“Oh dear. Well then… Shhh, settle down. It’s OK,” Rhea comforts the little girl.

As soon as Janie has calmed and her sobs have turned to hiccups, Rhea says, “Why don’t you go inside and get ready for supper? We’ll talk about this later. Ask Miss Leevy for a cup of water, ok?”

“OK,” Janie hiccuped back, pulls herself out of Rhea’s arms around Rhea’s neck, and then heads inside.

Katniss turns to leave, realizing she’s done nothing that Rhea should be upset over.

“Miss Everdeen! Wait!” Rhea calls.

Katniss stops and turns around, unsure what she would want.

“Thank you for taking care of Janie and bringing her home.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” Katniss replies. “She is a sweet girl. I’m just sorry for all of the trouble caused.”

“Well, you didn’t cause it, but thank you anyway,” Rhea smiles back. “And she is a sweet girl. Curious, in her own special way.”

“Yeah,” Katniss smiled, “I figured that out!”

“Well, thanks again.”

“Um, sure, no problem.”

“Miss Everdeen?”

“Please call me Katniss.”

“OK, Katniss, please call me Rhea.”

So it is Rhea, Katniss thinks.

“Would it be alright if I stopped in for a visit tomorrow?”

“Um, sure?” she answers, not wanting to give offense, but wondering at the reason behind the invitation.

“Great!” Rhea says, obviously relieved. “Could I come by after the children are off to school? Or you could come here, if you wanted to?”

“Why don’t you come to my place,” Katniss answers. She’s not sure about this visit, but she knows she’d rather be on her own ground when she finds out.

“Great then! I’ll see you tomorrow!”

As Katniss leaves, she wonders what on earth Rhea could want.
District 10: Peeta

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Titania522 for her mad beta'ing skills and her never tiring, always encouraging attitude! Thanks to the readers, reviewers, and followers for your faith in my story. And, as always, thanks to Suzanne Collins for Katniss Everdeen.

We're back in District 10

District 10

One day, as Katniss makes her way from her solitary bunk to the main house for breakfast, she hears someone whistle the Mockingjay tune. For some reason, though, it seems more antagonistic than friendly. She ignores it and walks up the steps and enters the main house.

“Well, well, well,” she hears one of the other men say sarcastically, “The Mockingjay has decided to grace herself with our presence.” The man is bigger than she is, and about ten years older. She recognizes him as the one who threatened to hurt her if she woke them up with her screaming one more time. John is his name. He is definitely not an ally.

Katniss grits her teeth, gets her breakfast from the sideboard and sits at the end of the table.

“Still scream about Peeta every night? Hmm?” John asks cruelly. “There’s something I’m not sure of though. Were those screams of passion or of fear?”

“Shut up.” Katniss quietly but firmly says, trying to mind her own business.

“No, but really,” he eggs her on, laughing and trying to get the others involved. “Which is it? Because there’s so much information going around out there that I wonder what the truth is. So I figured I’d go right to the source. Is he your lover or your enemy? I mean, on the one hand, you’re these “Star Crossed Lovers” during your Games.”

He looks around and says, as if he’s an investigator trying to uncover a plot, “He even knocked you up, right? So it could be passion you’re screaming about…”

At this point, Katniss is trying with all her might to keep calm and just ignore what he’s saying.

“Or!” It could be pain. I mean, we’ve all seen that footage of him in the Capitol trying to bash your brains in. Plus, on the day you “Shot the Last Arrow” and ended up killing the wrong president right after that, it looked like he was trying to grab you, to keep you from getting away from the guards. You even bit him! I saw it all, right up there on the jumbo screen,” he looks up and sweeps his hand through the air, to add visual effect. “That wasn’t love I saw at that moment.”

At this he looks her square in the eye, no blinking, no flinching, and his finger is pointed right between her eyes.

“And then!” he continues, his laughter really building, “And then you’re shouting for that other guy… that one you said was your so-called cousin.”

He stops laughing immediately, turns back to her and asks, “So, Peeta. Is he your lover? Or do you hate each other?”

“Shut up!” Katniss screams, unable to control herself any longer. “Just shut up! You know nothing!”

“Oh but Ms. Mockingjay I do. I do know things. I know that good people died protecting you and lover boy,” John sneers. “I know that, for some reason, people bought into this idea that you were worth it.

“But as soon as he’s taken, he’s spewing out words, trying to tell us to follow the Capitol. “ He says, disgustedly. “People died to save his ass and that’s how he repaid them. So yeah, I DO ‘know’ things.”

At this, Katniss jumps up from the table and launches herself at this man. This man who thinks he knows so much, but really has no clue.

“You leave Peeta out of this!” Katniss screams, while slapping at John’s face. “If you have a problem with me, fine! But leave Peeta alone!”

It takes two people to tear Katniss off of John. All the while, she continues to hit, kick, and scream at him.

And the man just laughs at her derisively.

“Katniss!” Maggie shouts about the scene. Immediately Katniss stops. She knows she’s done it now. What will they do to her? She isn’t safe anywhere. Katniss just stands in the corner, her body shaking, and her eyes focused downward.

“John.” Maggie continues firmly. “Don’t you have cattle to brand any longer. “Just shut up! You know nothing!”

“Or” Mrs. Mockingjay I do. I do know things. I know that good people died protecting you and lover boy,” John sneers. “I know that, for some reason, people bought into this idea that you were worth it.

“Then I anticipate you will be busy until suppertime. You and the rest, get ready and head out. A lunch will be sent out at noon. Good day, John.” Maggie adds with finality.

With a scowl on his face, John leaves, followed by the others. They all avoid making eye contact with anyone.

“Ms. Everdeen. I believe you have your own chores to do. I will see you at dinnertime.” With that, Katniss is dismissed for the morning.

As Katniss goes about her morning routine, she begins to think about what John has said.

First of all, who is he? What does he know? It seems he has some insider information, but not all of it. And what does he mean people died to keep her and Peeta safe?

How dare he say these things about Peeta! Is that what everyone thinks? That he was a traitor? Or that he hated her? Is that what the whole country believes? No. Surely not, or Peeta would have been arrested too. Maybe he was? Where is he now? What other unspeakable acts could they do to him?
She begins to feel herself panic. This won’t do. Breathe Katniss, breathe. She knows she can’t help him. But she needs to know he’s safe. Would Maggie know? Would Maggie tell her?

Katniss imagines Prim saying, “He’s fine. He’ll be OK. Just ask Maggie. She’ll know. You can do this.” And Katniss begins to calm herself.

Well Prim, Katniss thinks, Only you can help me here. And you’re not even ‘here’ anymore.

At dinnertime, Katniss realizes she’s the only ranch hand around. Nervously she goes to the house to wash up for lunch. She knows she’ll be alone with Maggie. She begins to wonder what will happen. She’s already committed a serious infraction. Will Maggie send her back? Would that be bad? Yes, she knows it would. As little contact as she has had with others here, at least it’s something. Back in the Capitol she would be totally alone. She’s not sure she could endure that again.

She enters the dining room and notices the table is set for two. “Katniss!” she hears Maggie call from the kitchen, “Sit down, I’ll be right there.”

So Katniss sits, and waits for further instructions.

Maggie comes carrying a platter of meats, cheeses, and breads. Katniss then notices the vegetables and a pitcher of water on the sideboard so she gets up to get them.

“Oh my, thank you!” Maggie says, grateful for the help. “So, eat up and then we’ll talk.”

It’s a quiet lunch. Katniss has never been much of a talker, and her current situation stifles her even more.

Once they’ve finished a large portion of the meal, Maggie puts down her napkin, puts her elbows on the table and asks, “Do you want to tell me what this morning was all about?”

“No.”

“Katniss, I can’t help if you keep yourself closed off. I may not know all of what happened, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t start it.”

Katniss looks up at Maggie for the first time since they sat down to eat.

“So then,” Maggie continues, “I think I’m pretty accurate when I say John provoked you?”

“Yes.”

Maggie sighs, trying not to get frustrated with Katniss’s one-word answers. “And…?”

“He was talking about Peeta. He was talking like he knew his story, like Peeta wasn’t who I know he is. He just kept going and going and I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“Katniss, as hard as it is to hear, you can’t let what John says get to you. He provoked you and will continue to provoke you because of who he is. He’s angry and bitter.”

Katniss wonders why. Why is John even here? Why is anyone here? So she asks Maggie as much.

“Everyone at the ranch is here for a reason. Every one of you is valuable to the present government. But every one of you needs to ‘disappear’ for a while. I can’t tell you who, but some were double agents, some know secrets from the old regime. Some know secrets from the new. All of you need to be protected from someone or something.”

“And John?”

“You know I can’t tell you specifics, Katniss. Just know he knew some of those people who died protecting you and Peeta.” Maggie pauses to let this sink in. “The revolution is over, so now he has time to dwell on his own losses. I’ll do my part to keep him away from you, but you have to try to ignore his taunting.”

Katniss rolls her eyes and tries to interrupt, “But it wasn’t…”

“Katniss, have you ever been chased by a wild animal?” Maggie interrupts.

“Yes,” Katniss replies, trying to figure out where this is going.

“What’s the best way to get away from one?”

“Kill it.”

“Or…” Maggie encourages, trying to hide the smirk on her face.

“Well, you find a way to get out of that situation, like climb a tree or hide. Then you wait for them to get bored and leave you alone.”

“Exactly.” Maggie interjects, “That’s what you need to do. Try to find a way to remove yourself from the situation and ignore him until he gets bored.”

This doesn’t sit well with Katniss, but really, she has no other option. Once again Katniss wonders about Peeta. “Maggie, can I ask you one thing?”

“You can ask, but I don’t guarantee an answer,” Maggie smiles back.

“Is Peeta OK? Is he safe?”

“Katniss,” Maggie says, a touch of kindness and compassion in her voice. “I can’t tell you about Peeta or anyone else.”

“Please Maggie? Just this one thing, please?” Katniss pleads.

Maggie sighs. “Yes Katniss. He’s safe. He’s just fine. Now, you need to worry about you.”
We're back in D12 for this one. I have read this, and edited it, and probably over-edited it, so I decided I might as well post it. I hope you like where it's leading!

Once again, thanks to Titania522 for her friendship, her encouragement, and her faith in me!

Thank you dear readers and commenters and followers! Thank you for your encouragement!

And, of course, Thank you to Suzanne Collins for Katniss Everdeen.

Chapter 10
District 12- Socializing

If being in the woods has helped Katniss feel more like herself, then her continued talks with Anya have helped her focus her mind and her daily routines. They help remind her of her need for an “outward” life- whether Katniss wants one or not.

“No woman is an island, Katniss,” Anya has told her. “We are all a part of this community. And you are no exception. You may want to go it alone, but you can’t. People aren’t built that way. We all need each other.”

So, with thoughts of Anya encouraging her to open up to others, Katniss opens her front door to welcome Rhea in.

Rhea is just as pretty as she was when Katniss first saw her. She also seems very kind.

“I’m so glad to be here Katniss. Thank you!” she says, not as exuberantly as Delly, but bubbly nonetheless.

“Um, sure.” Katniss replies. Remember what Anya says, “Be open, be friendly. People want to like you.”

Rhea hasn’t come empty handed, either. She hands a box stamped with Mellark’s to Katniss.

“I stopped by the bakery on my way here,” Rhea tells her. “When Peeta found out where I was going, he made sure to put in some treats he knew you’d like.”

Sure enough, when Katniss peeks into the box she sees cheese buns and some cookies. This simple gesture makes her smile.

“He also said to tell you to stop by sometime,” Rhea finishes.

“Oh? He did?”

Rhea just smiles, still standing in the doorway.

It’s been so long since Katniss has been in a situation like this; she’s not sure what to do. It’s not like she was very good being a hostess in the first place. Her mother was the one who always knew what to do.

“Won’t you come in?” She finally offers, leading Rhea into the kitchen. “Would you like some tea?”

“Sure, thank you!” Rhea says, perhaps a little too loudly. “Oh, sorry that was loud. For some reason, I’m kind of nervous.”

“Oh. Well, don’t be.” Katniss says so bluntly that that both start to laugh. Well, Rhea laughs, Katniss smirks.

It starts off awkward, but little by little they both start to relax. Once they do, they start to enjoy each other’s company.

“I’ve been wanting to introduce myself since you came back to the District, Katniss. So yesterday, when you came with Janie I just took advantage of the situation. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I’m supposed to ‘get out more’ and ‘meet people’, or at least that’s what Haymitch, Sae, Thom, and Anya keep telling me. It’s just kind of hard. And it looks like so much has changed in 12,” Katniss answers, hoping she isn’t giving away too much about herself. She’s still working on that balance of sharing and keeping information.

“How do you find life in 12? Is it different than where you’re from?” she asks Rhea.

“Oh, it’s been really good. Everyone’s worked so hard to clean up and move on. I’m glad to be able to do my part.” Rhea answers enthusiastically. “I grew up in 6, so the hills are a lot higher here, but people are people everywhere.”

“How did you get here from 6? Or better yet, why move here from 6? I would think there might be more to offer you there?” Katniss wonders.

“Well, the war is over and it’s a ‘new day in Panem’. I’ve always wondered what life was like in another district, so when this opportunity came up, I jumped at it. It’s been one of the best decisions of my life.”

“Really? Moving to a bombed out district with hardly anyone here?”

“Yes,” Rhea smiles back. “I mean, at first it was kind of lonely. But as time passed, more and more people moved here. It didn’t take too long to get to know others. And once people realized the Home would be different than it used to be, they opened up more.”

Rhea goes on to explain the new model for the Community Home system in Panem, where four or five children live in a home-like environment, “District 12 only has one home, but some of the larger districts have many. They thought for a while it might be hard to find people willing to do the job, but so far it’s all working out.”

“Do you manage the home all on your own?”
“Oh no! Leevy, you know Leevy, right?”

Of course Katniss knows Leevy.

“Well, Leevy and I work together. All of our children are now primary school age. Leevy and I take turns with the cooking and cleaning and managing the home and the children. We both live there, but I’m the main caregiver.

“It works well,” Rhea continues, “and we even have some who like to come and give us a break some evenings. Sae always enjoys a visit, and she brings her granddaughter. Peeta’s great about volunteering. He always sends baked goods, comes to play with the kids, and tells them stories.” At this, Rhea’s voice fades out.

If Katniss notices a slight change in Rhea’s voice, she says nothing other than, “So, that’s how Janie’s learned so much about me!”

“Yes. Now that I think about it, you were always a favorite topic when Peeta came to talk with the little ones.”

Katniss starts to feel a bit uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, so she begins to change the subject. “Sounds like you’ve really become a part of 12.” She says politely.

“At first, some of the natives were a bit stand-offish, but once they realized I cared about this place, they accepted me. Of course, I think Peeta helped with that. Well, Peeta and Dolly. They really welcomed me first. Then Leevy started working with me and I think that made me ‘official’.”

“What about the Home though? I remember what the Community Home was like before… well, before everything. It wasn’t a very nice place.”

“It’s not perfect, but I’d like to think we’re doing some things right. We seem to get a lot of community support. Peeta with the baked goods, the people on the construction crew make sure everything is always up to code. Even Greasy Sae cooks for us sometimes.”

Katniss thinks on this. It seems 12 is really pulling together, becoming a real community. It’s so different than before the war. Back then, you hardly knew your neighbor. Now, it seems that they all depend on each other. She thinks this is one reason Anya wants her to get to know more people. It seems that being a hermit won’t get you too far in 12 these days.

“You know,” Rhea continues after taking a sip of tea, “Janie hasn’t stopped talking about you since yesterday. I think she fell asleep telling everyone about you.”

Katniss smiles at this. A real smile too, not just a smirk, because if the truth were told, Janie made a pretty big impact on Katniss too.

“Miss Katniss was so nice,” Rhea says in Janie’s voice, and she tells Katniss about some more of what Janie had to say. “Miss Katniss listened and held my hand… I thought she might sing, but she didn’t… And did you know she really doesn’t have wings?”

Rhea laughs. “Oh Katniss, if you only knew the effect you have had on her. She never used to smile that much. We didn’t even know she could talk so much! She came from a pretty bad situation. She wasn’t even two, but there are some things that impact us all, even babies.

“So, when she snuck away after school yesterday, we were so worried, not sure what she was doing. But to find out she followed you home, and now she just won’t stop going on about you, well, that’s just something we didn’t expect.”

Katniss finds herself overwhelmed by the thought of what she’s learned. Poor Janie. She just needs someone to love her. Really love her.

“Katniss,” Rhea interrupts her thoughts. “Would you ever…hmmm, I know this might be overstepping my bounds here… but when I see how Janie’s responded to you after only a few hours, when we’ve had her for over three years… Well, would you consider spending more time with her?”

This takes Katniss aback. It’s totally unexpected, and she wonders if it’s even allowed.

“I’ll have think about it and let you know.” Katniss says, a little unsure. She doesn’t want to have to tell Rhea that she needs to speak to Thom about this, but that is her first thought.

Relief floods Rhea’s face, “Just think about it, OK? I care so much for that little girl, and I really think it might be good for both of you.”

As they finished their tea and talked about little things like gardening and the weather, Rhea notices the time, “Oh! I’d better get going. I have some errands to do before school lets out. Thank you so much for letting me stop by. I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you, Katniss!”

“Yeah,” Katniss finds herself smiling a bit, surprised that she really did have a nice time. “I’ve enjoyed it too. It is nice to meet you.”

“Um.” Rhea begins as she steps out the door, she seems unsure if she wants to ask the next question or not, but seems to decide to ask it. “Um, there’s a group of us that get together for meals every couple of weeks. Tonight is our night to meet. Umm. Would you join us? Please? I know everyone else there would love to have you!”

Katniss isn’t so sure about this. Going out with a bunch of people she may not know.

“It’s really just myself, Leevy, Thom, Peeta, Dolly, and even Haymitch joins us. Sae usually cooks something for us and then watches the kids so Leevy and I can both go. Please join us!”

Since it seems Rhea is the only one that Katniss hasn’t known before now, she thinks about what Anya might say. She thinks about the district today–how people are depending on each other like the never used too. And against the anxiety she’s starting to feel, she hears herself say, “OK.”

Later that afternoon, the phone rings, “Katniss!” Thom says on the other end of the line. “I’m glad I caught you at home.”

“Since I had no other plans, I thought I’d just stick around,” Katniss attempts to joke.

“Well,” Thom laughs a bit, “first things first. I hear from Anya that things are going well?”

“Yes,” she replies shortly, realizing that though she is free, not everything in her life is private. “She doesn’t go into detail, don’t worry.” Thom says, sensing Katniss’s reticence. “I’m just glad you’re going to see her and you’re doing fine. Now the next thing, I ran into Rhea this morning.”
"Uh, yeah, she was here today."

"That’s what she was saying, that she was going to see you today. That’s great Katniss, Rhea’s a really nice girl. I’m glad she reached out to you. She was also talking to me a bit about you and Janie."

"Yeah, she told me that too, only, I wasn’t sure if, um, I’m allowed to do anything like that."

"Katniss, you have never hurt children. There is nothing in your terms of release regarding this type of situation. Now, I’ve spoken to some others just to be sure, and everyone agrees this would be good, not only for Janie, but for you."

"Everyone?"

"Yes. People in 12, authorities in the Capitol, everyone. We want you to have a good life Katniss. You’re a part of 12. If you want to spend more time with that little girl, then you should do it."

Katniss realizes, in that moment, how happy this makes her. She did enjoy her time with Janie, and she suddenly realizes it’s time for her to do something for someone else. "OK Thom. Thanks. I’ll talk to Rhea about this later."

"Good, good! And I also hear I’ll see you at Peeta’s tonight!"

This takes her by surprise. "Oh?" She forgot that Thom may be there.

"Don’t worry, I’ll be ‘off the clock’. It’s purely social. 12 is too small to keep our official distance."

"Well then, yeah. I guess I’ll see you at Peeta’s?" she says a bit unsure.

Later that evening, Katniss stands by the door. She’s having an intense argument with herself. It’s time to go to Peeta’s, but she can’t seem to put her hand on the doorknob.

Haven’t I done enough socializing for one day? They might not even miss me… But I did tell both Rhea and Thom I’d be there…but it’s at Peeta’s. Peeta! I haven’t said more than a few words to him since I’ve been back. In some ways, it’s like we’re in school again. He looks at me, and I’m tongue-tied. For pity’s sake. It’s not like I don’t know him. It’s Peeta… She’s embarrassed, and flustered and anxious.

As she stands behind the door, Haymitch opens it. "Well then, Sweetheart! There you are, let’s go!"

And without giving her a chance to say anything, Haymitch ushers her out the door and over to Peeta’s house.

Once they get to Peeta’s, Katniss realizes she and Haymitch aren’t the first ones there. Peeta, Delly and Thom are in the kitchen, making last minute touches to the food.

"Katniss! Delly exclaims, as only Delly can. "It’s so good to see you! I’m so glad you’re here!"

"Hello Katniss," Thom chuckles kindly, smiling at Delly. "It’s good to see you here. And remember- off the clock!"

Katniss smiles at this, she feels more comfortable now that Thom has acknowledged this.

"Hey Katniss?" Peeta says warmly. "I’m so glad you’re here." He smiles at her, looking directly in her eyes, like he wants to make sure she knows just how wanted she is here. While they’ve shared hellos in passing, they still haven’t really spoken. It seems that Peeta is trying to make up for that this evening.

"Why don’t all of you go have a seat in the living room while I finish up in here," Peeta suggests. "We’re just waiting for Rhea and Leevy."

No sooner does Peeta say this, then the girls come in, "Hey! We’re all here now!"

"Sae volunteer to watch the kids so you ladies can get out!" Haymitch asks.

"Of course," Rhea replies. "Just like she always does. I wonder where half of this district would be without Sae."

"I’d say the end of the Revolution brought out the best in that woman," Haymitch agrees.

Leevy makes her way over to Katniss, and sits by her quietly, gently squeezing her hand. "Hey Katniss, I’m so glad to finally see you again."

Katniss smiles shyly at Leevy. The girls were neighbors growing up, and though they weren’t exactly friends, they do have a bond. After all, it was Leevy who helped out when Gale was whipped, and it was Leevy who stood up for Katniss at that meeting in District 13.

"So, you work with Rhea at the home?"

"Yeah. It’s really good. I’m glad to have something to do, and the kids are great. I was so glad when Rhea brought me on," Leevy volunteers. "We both get along really well."

The meal goes on successfully. Lots of talking and laughing. At first Katniss feels as if she doesn’t belong, but soon she begins to realize something. They all want her here. No one is ignoring her. They all give her space, but they also include her in their conversation.

All in all, Katniss enjoys herself. Before the end of the evening Rhea pulls her aside, "Have you thought anymore about Janie?"

"Yeah… yes I have. I think I’d like to be her friend," Katniss says nervously.

"Oh Katniss! That’s wonderful! What would you say to picking her up after school and hanging out with her until suppertime?"

"I… I guess so?" Katniss answers, a bit surprised at how quickly this is all going.

"Oh that’s great!" Rhea says, then calls Delly over to join their conversation. "Katniss will be picking Janie up after school tomorrow."

"That’s great Katniss! School lets out around 2:30, will that work for you? I am sure that is all she will talk about tomorrow. You were all she spoke of today!"

As the evening starts to close, she prepares to leave, "Hey Katniss!" she hears Peeta call. "Let me walk you home."
“Um, sure?” she answers. Although she’s not sure, not really. She hasn’t been alone with Peeta in over five years, let alone had a conversation with him that lasted more than a few words. What will she say? What will HE say? She’s a bit overwhelmed, with all of the events of the day, and now this. She supposes it’s time she actually put a little effort forth with Peeta. Now is her chance to make up for the way she’s been acting when she sees him in town.

“Great! Just give me a second!” he answers, not really seeing Katniss’s reaction.

“Katniss,” Thom stops her. “Since you’ll be by to get Janie after school, why don’t you come by my office, say around noon? I have some papers for you to sign, regarding Janie and I’d like to go for a walk in the woods. I’ll bet you’d be the perfect tour guide.”

At this, Katniss begins to get nervous for a different reason. Noticing Katniss’s discomfort, Thom gently adds, “I just want to see about some district boundaries. Everything’s OK, I promise.”

With that, Katniss takes a calming breath. She has no reason to doubt Thom, and she doesn’t want to start now. “OK. Noon then?”

“Well, let’s have lunch too. And you can save yourself a phone call tonight and tomorrow morning. I know where you are, and I’ll see you tomorrow,” he smiles and turns around and calls to Delly, seeing if she’s ready to leave.

“Ready, Katniss?” Peeta asks.

“Um, yeah, I guess?” So much has happened this evening, it’s left Katniss a bit breathless.

It’s a short walk over to Katniss’s, and she wonders why Peeta feels the need to walk her home.

“Thanks for the vegetables, Katniss. It was a nice surprise to come home to.”

“Well, since you planted the garden, I suppose you should get some of the bounty, right?”

“When you put it that way,” he smiles in response, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

Now is her chance. “Thanks for all of the bread, and the baked goods too.”

“Of, you know I always have a bunch left over. I couldn’t think of anyone better to give it to.”

She smiles and looks down shyly, “Thanks anyway.”

“I’m really glad you came tonight,” Peeta says softly. “It’s been really good seeing you. Maybe I can stop by sometime?”

“Sure Peeta, anytime.” she responds quietly, thinking they’ve said more in this five-minute walk than they have since the fall of the Capitol.

“Whew, good! I’ve… I’ve missed you,” he says with a huge grin. He then turns serious, “I know I haven’t said too much since you got back. But, I wasn’t sure what to say, and I didn’t want to be overbearing. I know that sometimes I can do that. Plus, the last time we saw each other, we didn’t exactly finish off on the best terms,” he smiles sadly.

Katniss remembers the panic, the fear she saw in his eyes back in the Capitol and after the assassination. She also remembers how she felt those same things.

“I guess I just didn’t want to scare you, Katniss. That’s all. But I do want to see you, to talk with you. I’ve missed talking to you.”

Katniss thinks of all of the things she knows he’s done for her. Taking care of her house, and of Buttercup. Planting a garden. Bringing her bread. And she also realizes he’s right. She knows how scared she was when she first returned to 12. She knows that she needed to become more grounded and settled here before she could even think about anyone else.

“OK Peeta. Tomorrow after supper?”

Peeta smiles, “You’ll allow it?”

“Yeah. I’ll allow it.” She smiles back.
When Katniss was young, she didn’t have many toys. But she did have crayons, and she did have paper. She would lay on the rug in front of the old coal heater with the paper in front of her and pull out the black crayon. Starting in the top corner, without once picking the crayon up off of the page, Katniss would draw intricate swirls, circles, and waves, over and over until her page was full of shapes and spaces. Then she would color each individual space, making sure to never color two shapes near each other the same color. She would entertain herself for hours just drawing and coloring like this.

When her daddy would come home from the coal mine, and after he cleaned himself up, she would throw herself into his arms. Always he’d ask, “What’s my little girl been doing today?” And Katniss would wiggle out of his arms and run to get the papers she’d colored.

“What a beautiful mess Katniss!” he would say excitedly. And she knew, that even though he called it a mess, he loved it. He would fold it up, and put it into his lunch pail to take with him to work the next day.

One day her father told her, “You know, Katniss, life is kind of like your pictures. It may seem all messy and crazy, but when you step back and look at it, it’s just beautiful. It’s a beautiful mess.”

Katniss wasn’t sure she understood what he meant by all of this, but the way he said it made her feel good inside. And her momma would stand by with a big, proud smile on her face, so Katniss knew whatever it was that her daddy had said, it must have been good.

Katniss wakes up after dreaming of her father. She lies there, eyes closed, willing it to be true. Willing herself to be back when she was that little girl, when she felt safe and secure, when her daddy would take care of everything, when she thought it was ok to laugh and be happy. But she knows that isn’t true.

What she does do, is imagine that Prim is waiting for her back at home now. She refuses to believe the bombs went off in the City Centre and she was there. She refuses to believe that Prim was killed in the Capitol. In her mind, Prim is back in 12, helping her mother tend the sick.

That fantasy lasts for about a week. Until she wakes up so angry she thinks she will actually hurt someone. The fury in her burns and it has to be released. She stands and heads over to the little sink in her quarters, slamming the cupboard-open and clearing the shelves, throwing the contents, one at a time, into the wall in front of her. This does nothing to relieve the anger.

So she heads over to her bunk, screaming as she pulls the mattress off, throwing the blankets and pillows to the floor. Tearing the sheets in the corners as she rips them off the bed. Still her anger burns.

The footlocker comes next. She empties the contents, throwing the clothes, chucking the boots into the wall. She picks up the box and heaves it out the door, screaming as loudly as she can.

She knows a guard is there, because she hears Maggie yelling in the background, “Don’t stop her! You leave her be!” as Katniss destroys her bunkhouse.

Finally, the anger burns out and she sits there, staring ahead, neither seeing nor caring.

“About finished now girl?” Maggie asks.

“Yes.” Katniss answers curtly.

“Then get this cleaned up. I expect to see you at breakfast in one hour.”

And that begins what Maggie refers to as Katniss’s “angry” period.

She walks around the ranch with a huge chip on her shoulder. Angry at the world, angry at her circumstances, angry at her sister, angry at her mother, angry at her father, angry at Peeta, at Gale, angry at anyone who had the gall to be a part of her life. They all should have known better. She’s nothing but bad news.

It takes awhile for Katniss to come to terms with her anger. But one day, she realizes she isn’t angry anymore.

Suddenly, she wants to just go home. She thinks that will solve her problem. If she could just go home, say goodbye to Prim in her own way. So Katniss comes up with the perfect plan.

She knows that the terms of her incarceration say she must serve the full 5 years, but what if she really is on her best behavior? What if she does exactly what is asked of her, all of the time, without hesitation or even without any hidden rebellion? Maybe they’ll see that she’s learned her lesson? Maybe they’ll let her go home?

She puts this plan into action. She’s up and ready on time each day. The guards never have to force her out of bed, never have to tell her to hurry with her chores. She volunteers to clean up the breakfast dishes, and helps with the supper preparation.

It’s easy to be perfect for a while, but you can’t keep that up indefinitely, Katniss finds. She tried so hard, thinking that maybe it would work. But it didn’t. She’s still here, in this cage, waiting to go home.

It doesn’t matter what she does, does it? She can be bad, she can be good. It only means that she’s at the ranch until they decide her time is up. This makes it harder for Katniss to keep up with
herself, and soon, she slips.

It gets harder to wake up each day, harder to sleep each night. She no longer asks to help. She’s just putting in her time, waiting for it to all be over, wishing she could make it end sooner, but knowing she can’t. She’s living in a grey world, neither light nor dark. Up in the morning, eat, chores, eat again, more chores, eat another time, wait until lights out, stare into the darkness. It repeats itself each day.

She isn’t sure how long it lasts, this twilight world she was living in. But one day she has that dream again. The one where she’s a little girl coloring a paper to give to her daddy. She sees him smile again, she feels that little spark of joy. She hears her father praise her, sees her mother’s proud look.

When she wakes up, she knows it isn’t real. She knows it’s just a dream. But she understands it for what it is. A beautiful mess.

She gets up out of bed, ready for the day. She knows her troubles aren’t over. Not by a long shot. She will probably have to work through this over and over again. But now? Now she feels like she can meet this head on.

She’s not sure if she can ever call her life beautiful, or even if it will beautiful. But it most definitely is a mess. Her mess.
Thanks to all of you for reading, and following, and the kudo's. It's always so nerve wracking when I press the publish button! So thank you all for your encouragement.

Thanks to Titania522 for being my beta- you have so much going on, so thank you, as always for taking some time out of your life to help me become a better writer.

And, as always, I thank Suzanne Collins for Katniss Everdeen.

Chapter 12- District 12: Revelations

The next day, Katniss finds not only a basket filled with cheese buns outside her door, but a note as well.

Stop by the bakery on your way to see Thom and it's signed Peeta.

The bell chimes as she enters the shop. She’s seen the bakery through the windows, but this is her first time inside the store itself. She looks around at the quaint place. The display cases are tastefully decorated with cakes and cookies. There is a counter to order and pay, and tables around for people to sit and eat if they choose. The lunch crowd is beginning to filter in, so Katniss decides to get the attention of the girl behind the counter before it gets too busy.

“Excuse me. Is Peeta here?” Katniss asks tentatively.

The young girl looks up and smiles at Katniss. “Just a moment!” and she turns to the door that seems to lead to the kitchen. “Peeta, there’s someone here for you!”

“Katniss!” Peeta says happily as he walks in from the kitchen. “You got my note?”

“That was clever Peeta, putting it in with the cheese buns. You knew I’d get it then.” Katniss smiles at her attempt at a joke.

Peeta, enjoying both her smile and her efforts, reaches down below the counter and lifts up a basket of goods.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for your lunch with Thom. He asked me last night to prepare some things for you two.”

“Oh. Well then, how much do I owe?” Katniss asks, reaching into her pocket.

“Thom’s got it covered,” he waves her away. “Don’t worry about it.”

Of course this bothers Katniss. She’s trying to learn to accept kindness from others, but it isn’t easy.

“If there’s a problem,” Peeta continues with a smile, pushing the basket in her direction, “Take it up with him. I’m just the preparer.”

“OK,” she sighs. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Right after supper. Count on it!” he answers with a big smile.

And with that, she picks up the basket, leaves the shop and heads over to the Justice Building.

Thom is ready and waiting on the stairs. “Ready Ms. Everdeen?” he teases.

“Sure Thom. Do you know where you want to go?”

“Gale once showed me a rock, said it’s where you two used to meet. Why don’t we start out there?”

Katniss nods her head and they make their way to the woods.

It’s a quiet walk, and it doesn’t take them long to get where they are going. Even though Katniss has been here many times since returning to the District, she can’t help but imagine a younger Katniss and a younger Gale laughing on that same rock. It gives her a sense of nostalgia, knowing that all happened in another time. She pushes it down though, because she’s moving on with her life. They sit and enjoy the early afternoon sunshine while they share what Peeta has prepared.

“Thanks for the lunch, by the way. How much do I owe you?” Katniss asks as they unpack what Peeta has prepared.

“No, really! We’re given a stipend so I thought I’d use part of it for our lunch.” he hands her a sandwich.

Katniss takes a bite of her sandwich, thinking this over. She realizes she’ll take this gift. To her mind, Panem owes her a hell of a lot more than a free lunch, but it is a start.

They start off with some small talk. The weather’s been great. The District is really coming along, making a name for itself in the new country.

Thom suggests they start to walk, there’s a place he’d like to check out. They pack up what is left and put it into the basket, and go on their way.

As they walk Thom says, “It’s amazing how Janie was with you. According to Rhea, she’s never seen the girl this happy or this talkative.”
“Really?” she looks at him questioningly.

“Yes. You should have seen her when she first came, just a little thing. They found her in a cave in District 2.”

Katniss stops short at this information. “A cave? What? Really?”

“Yeah. Her parents were apparently big Snow loyalists. There were a whole bunch of them, hiding in caves surrounding the main center of 2.”

This intrigues Katniss. She didn’t even think about people being loyal to the old regime, let alone willing to go into hiding like that.

“So what happened?” she asks as they continue to walk.

“After the Capitol fell, there were still some skirmishes, especially in 2. Gale was sent there to help bring it all under control. The way he tells it, these bands of people were hiding and would attack little outposts here and there. There was one final offensive that finally brought peace to 2.

“Gale and some others went looking for any survivors, and they heard crying in this cave. When they went in, the whole lot of them were lying dead. All except for Janie. She was just crawling around the bodies, crying.”

Katniss stands there, stunned at this news. She realizes she is crying.

Thom nods, acknowledging Katniss’ emotions. “As near as Gale could tell, they’d all committed mass suicide. He assumes the mother didn’t kill the little girl. Gale picked her up and brought her back to base. There was no way of finding any family, so Cressida encouraged Gale to take her to a Home.”

“Wait! Cressida?” Katniss says, the story keeps getting more and more incredulous.

“Yeah,” Thom chuckles. “It seems she was shooting footage for a documentary and was in 2. While there, she and Gale got… close, as they say.”

“Cressida and Gale?” she wonders. “I never would have thought.”

“They get on real well. She’s good for him. Keeps him grounded.”

“Well… good.” Katniss realizes this news makes her happy. After everything that happened in the war, and after, both Gale and Cressida deserve to have some happiness.

“So, Cress encouraged Gale to put the baby in a home, and Gale chose ours. Wanted to the girl to be somewhere safe and away from everything.

“When she first came, she was a wild thing. Wouldn’t let go of Gale or Cress. So when they left, Rhea had her hands full. That’s when she brought Leevy in full time with her. Soon enough they got Janie to settle down, but she was a somber, quiet thing. That is, until you showed up.

“Seems she had everyone fooled! They thought she’d closed herself off because of all that happened. But she must have just been listening and waiting. Peeta stops by and brings treats to the kids, tells them stories. Seems like Janie was listening the most!”

Through all of this, Katniss is silent, taking it all in. Janie’s early life, Gale and Cressida, Peeta and the Home. It’s all amazing.

“You know what I think?” Thom says suddenly. “I think Gale brought Janie here for a reason. I think you are the reason. Whether it was all planned, I can’t say for sure. But life sure has a way of working out sometimes. I can’t think of anyone better for Janie than you.”

Katniss is somber as she contemplates this. She’s not sure about everything Thom says about life working out and reasons for things. But she does know that she and Janie seem to share a connection, and her own life has taught her that everyone needs someone to love, and to love them.

As they stroll through the woods a while longer, they find themselves by the hollowed-out tree where she keeps her bow and arrows stashed. Katniss tries not to let the panic she feels inside show on her face, because if Thom finds them, she’ll be in big trouble.

Thom stops and leans against the trunk. “You know, about a week before you were sent back, Gale was here. Made a big sweep of the District and the woods surrounding it. Just making sure everything was safe,” Thom says casually. Then he pats the trunk and says thoughtfully, “It’s been awhile since anyone had any squirrel. Sure would be nice to taste that again…” And he saunters away with a wink and a smile, leaving Katniss’ mouth hanging open in shock.

Later that evening, after dropping Janie off at the home to hugs and kisses and promises that they will see each other tomorrow, and yes, Katniss will pick her up everyday after school and she’ll see what Rhea says about a sleepover after the school term breaks up in a few weeks, and with a smile and a wave to Rhea herself, Katniss finally makes it home and to a light supper.

When her supper is over and the kitchen is cleaned, Katniss sits on the back porch swing, cup of tea in hand, enjoying the evening and thinking about the day she’s had. She’s had a lot to work out and reasons for things. But she does know that she and Janie seem to share a connection, and her own life has taught her that everyone needs someone to love, and to love them.

As they stroll through the woods a while longer, they find themselves by the hollowed-out tree where she keeps her bow and arrows stashed. Katniss tries not to let the panic she feels inside show on her face, because if Thom finds them, she’ll be in big trouble.

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When her supper is over and the kitchen is cleaned, Katniss sits on the back porch swing, cup of tea in hand, enjoying the evening and thinking about the day she’s had. She’s had a lot to contemplate. Janie’s past, Gale and Cressida. But what she focusses the most on is what Thom has said about squirrel…

Looking up, she sees Peeta standing before her.

“Peeta!” she says, startled. She moves over to give him room on the swing.

“I knocked on your front door, but there was no answer. Thought I might come around back and find you here.” he says, climbing the stairs and sitting down next to her.

“We did say we’d meet up tonight, didn’t we? It’s been such a busy day, I’m afraid I almost forgot. After lunch with Thom, Janie and I spent the afternoon together.” she explains.

“That’s OK. I saw you come home earlier.”

“Would you like a cup of tea? And maybe a cookie? Seems like the local baker leave his extras for me,” she smiles.

“That sounds nice Katniss, and I know for a fact the local baker is only leaving you his best
“Willing to accept me again,” he jokes. “Ah, don’t worry about that. It didn’t take long. Once they tasted my cheese buns they were gone.”

“...That you had to endure so much, and when you finally get home, you’re greeted with suspicion.”

“For what now?”

“I’m sorry Peeta,” Katniss interjects suddenly. “I know it must be a sweet memory for you.”

“She was something else, wasn’t she?” he says after a bit.

“Hmm. She was. People say I’m the stubborn one. She was just as stubborn, maybe more so.” Katniss says, smiling sadly. “Peeta, thank you.”

“Thank me? For what Katniss?”

“For the primroses. For my house. For Buttercup. Thanks for taking care of things for me here. Haymitch told me.”

“Of course Katniss!” he says enthusiastically, then. “I mean, yeah, no problem.” as if he’s afraid of being too enthusiastic.

“It was very kind of you,” she finishes awkwardly, and they swing in silence.

“Um Peeta?” Katniss says after some time, “I know the last time we saw each other was a horrible time. I was such a mess and I just hoped it would all be finally over...” Katniss isn’t entirely sure where she’s going with this, but she can’t seem to stop herself. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry for your family, the war, your hijacking, how I treated you...” as she says this, tears stream down her cheeks. “I’m sorry about the vote, and I’m sorry I bit your hand.” and she wipes the tears from her cheeks.

During this confession, Peeta seems unsure of what to do, so he merely reaches over and squeezes her hand. At the final declaration, Peeta chuckles. “My hand is fine Katniss. It was a small price to pay for keeping you alive.” he looks at her, not letting go of her hand.

Soon they’re both laughing, though neither really knows why. Katniss supposes it’s because she feels so much lighter at finally confessing these things to him.

Peeta stops the swing, “Is this what you’ve been thinking this whole time Katniss? That you need to apologize to me? I mean, if you want me to say I forgive you, I will. But I hope you know I don’t blame you for anything.”

“Really? Even how I treated you in 13? Especially how I treated you in 13?” she looks away, “Yeah. Dr. Aurelius and I have had lots of talks on this.” Peeta tells her earnestly, wanting her to truly believe what he says. “He really helped me see your point of view. I’m just sorry you were put in a position like you were. You didn’t deserve any of it.” Peeta says passionately. “I’m just glad I could be a small part in helping you get your life back. Even if it was just taking care of your house and your cat.”

Katniss smiles at this and they sit, allowing a comfortable silence to settle in as they watch the evening fall. They begin to gently swing again, their hands now intertwined.

“So?” Katniss interrupts the quiet a little while later. “Haymitch told me you know all about me these last five years. What about you? What have you been up to?”

“Oh, you know, work, stuff.” Peeta replies, unsure how to condense five years into a single conversation.

“Seriously Peeta? That’s all you can say?”

“Yeah... no... OK. Where do I start?” Peeta stutters. “Right after your shot, they grabbed me, unsure of what my intentions were. They put me in the hospital, then moved me to the psychiatric ward. I spent a long time working with Dr. Aurelius, getting ahold of the hijacking, learning to control my mind instead of letting it control me.”

“And did it work?” she looks at him curiously.

“It took a long time, but yeah, I’d like to think so!” he nods his head thoughtfully. “I mean, I still have the occasional flashback, but they’re few and far between. When you were being held during your trial it was the worst, I think. By that point, the fact that I couldn’t protect you bothered me more than wanting to hurt you. That was a big transition in my healing. To know I’d progressed to that point.”

“We protect each other...” she says thoughtfully. “I remember feeling so helpless in 10. Not knowing what was happening to you, not being able to do anything about it.”

As she says this, her voice trembles and Peeta gives her hand another reassuring squeeze.

“We’re OK now, you and I. We can’t change the past, but we’ve got right now and the future. It will be good again, I know it,” Peeta says before continuing. “So, I just worked really hard with Dr. Aurelius, came back here, and worked hard on rebuilding my life. Or just building it, I guess. I know Haymitch told you some things. I wanted to build my life back, but I also wanted a home for you to come back to.”

“I got the bakery up and running, and got involved in the community. There were some who weren’t too sure about me. I guess they believed my ‘press,’ Peeta goes on. “So it took some time to gain some people’s trust, but we’re a tight knit place here in 12. Thankfully, people like Thom, Greasy Sae, and some of the others believed in me. I think that went a long way.”

“I’m sorry Peeta,” Katniss interjects suddenly.

“For what now?”

“That you had to endure so much, and when you finally get home, you’re greeted with suspicion.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that. It didn’t take long. Once they tasted my cheese buns they were willing to accept me again,” he jokes.
And that’s how they spend their evening, just sitting, swinging, and talking. That’s how they spend many evenings after this. Until it evolves into supper as well...
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read this story, follow it, and comment. You have no idea how much it means to me! To Titania522- thank you for everything! You are one of the best people I know.

And to Suzanne Collins- thank you for Katniss Everdeen. An incredibly complex character whose main fault is that she is all too human. That's why I love her so much.

Chapter 13- District 10: Retrospection

After that confrontation with John, Katniss does her best to stay away from him. Granted, there are times she can’t avoid him, but she never looks at him. She never even acknowledges him. He seems to be just as fine with this situation. At least, he no longer bothers Katniss outright. She notices a sneer here and there, but nothing she can’t handle. Katniss wonders what Maggie said to John to get him to back off.

The other girls on the ranch don’t quite know what to make of Katniss. On the one hand, they feel oddly sorry for John as their unofficial ‘leader’, especially since the bulk of their work is done with him. But on the other hand, they figure who are they to judge? Katniss is doing what she needs to in order to survive, just like they are.

When Katniss first arrived at the ranch, they tried to befriend her, to make conversations with her. But after enough blank stares from Katniss, they gave up. It’s easier this way, Katniss figures. The fewer people I know, the fewer I have to care about. It’s not as if she’s used to having a lot of friends anyway. Now Maggie is the only one she ever really speaks to. Well, the only person she speaks to.

As Katniss slowly begins to work through her grief, she finds herself with the desire to tell someone about all of those she’s lost, and those she may never see again. Even though she’s never been a talker, never been very good with words, she knows on an instinctive level that these are the things she needs to talk through. She feels compelled to get it out, to vocalize these inner thoughts. She’s been quiet for too long.

Something she’s discovered during her time on the ranch is a love of horses. There weren’t very many horses in 12. Mostly they were used for work in the mines, so they weren’t out and about in town or the Seam. She remembers how run down they always looked though. She also remembers the horses that drew the chariots at the opening ceremony of the games, how well trained and beautiful they were. These horses are different though. They aren’t run down horses, like in 12, or the slim, fancy horses of the Capitol. These horses are the muscular work horses of a ranch. Different, but just as beautiful as the chariot horses.

They seem to like Katniss, and allow her to pet and stroke them. When she gives them a rub down after a long day’s work, they whinny happily for her. They look for carrots or an apple that she may have, because she knows that they love a treat every now and then. She’s their friend, and they know it. She takes care of them, and they respond to her.

Katniss finds, while she’s mucking out their stalls or rubbing them down, that it’s easy to talk to them. They’re good listeners. At first she tells them about her day, what she’s done while they were out working. Over time though, she begins to tell them about her life. And she keeps on telling them, day after day. Not because she thinks they understand, or won’t remember, but because she’s afraid she won’t remember.

She tells them about her father. His voice so beautiful that he convinced a merchant’s daughter to leave the comforts of town, marry him, and move to the Seam. She tells them how much he loved her mother and his two girls. How he taught Katniss to swim and fish and hunt, just like his mother did for him, and so far on down her ancestral line that she doesn’t know who the first one was who taught her how to shoot a bow was. She just knows that it is in her blood, this idea of living off the land, of taking care of yourself and your family.

She tells them about her mother. How beautiful she was, and how she gave up everything, a life of a town merchant, just to be with the man she loved. She tells them how her mother, after losing the man, lost herself too. Katniss had an idyllic childhood, but it was all gone once her father died.

She tells them of her mother’s medicinal knowledge. How she knows the exact plants and herbs to cure colic, heal whip marks, and stop pain. And even though she knew all of this, she couldn’t stop the darkness from taking over. Katniss sometimes thinks she is over her resentment of her mother, but every so often, the bitterness rises up again. She wonders if she will always keep this in her heart? She supposes once it got in there, she couldn’t take it out, so she just moved on.

Katniss tells them about her best friend, Gale. How he could walk so silently through the forest no one could hear him. She tells them all of the good memories she has with Gale, because the bad ones are too painful. How they could make each other laugh with just a look. How in-sync they were out working. Over time though, she begins to tell them about her life. And she keeps on telling them, day after day. Not because she thinks they understand, or won’t remember, but because she’s afraid she won’t remember.

She tells them about Boggs. A soldier to the core, but also a father and a husband. Someone she knew she could rely on, whatever may be. He was one of the only people throughout the whole bloody revolution to view Katniss not just as a person, but also as a young girl. For a brief moment in her life she had a father again. She knows he truly cared about her. She wonders about his family now. Do they blame him for his death? She knows he certainly does.

She tells them about John. How the first time she met him, he was stealing sugar cubes from the chariot horses. “I wonder how you guys would feel about that?” she chuckles as she gives them a carrot.

She tells them how Finnick became one of her best friends, and one of her favorite people. How, on the outside, he had this playboy persona, but that was all fake. Inside, he was kind and good and loyal. He loved Mags like family. He and Johanna fought like brother and sister, and loved each other like family too. She told the horses the story of the sea turtle who stole his hat. The same
story he told once, over stew, in the District 13 cafeteria.

And she told them about Annie. Sweet Annie, the only girl Finnick ever truly loved. No one who saw them could ever have doubted their love for each other. How beautiful their wedding was. The love shining on both of their faces, the joy in their dance. It was something happy in the middle of so much despair.

She tells them about the Star Squad. They were a team thrown together, able to bond in the worst of times. How they couldn't help but laugh, even knowing the danger they were in. Maybe it was because of the danger they were in. War makes you do crazy things.

After a long time she tells them about Peeta. How strong he is. How good with words, how steady. “He’s a baker, a painter.” She smiles sadly as she thinks about him. “I remember on our Victory tour, he always liked to sleep with the windows open. I thought I’d be cold, but it did make what little sleep we got nicer.” Although now she wonders if it was the window open or her companion. “He never has sugar in his tea. And he always double-knots his shoelaces.” She has to stop there, just like she did in the Capitol when he was trying to figure out who he was.

It’s hard to talk about Peeta, she finds. So many feelings and conflicting emotions. Does he hate her? She saw his anger that last day, the day of the vote. His disgust at both her and Haymitch for voting to continue the games, for sticking together and leaving him out. He didn’t understand, couldn’t know what was going on in Katniss’s mind. How could he? She didn’t fully know herself until just that moment. She hopes he has forgiven her, wherever he is. She hopes his life is a good one, full of people who love and care for him. Because if anyone has earned that in this life, it’s Peeta. Peeta with the steady blue eyes and the quirky, shy smile. He still fills both her dreams and her nightmares.

She remembers that confrontation with John. She, herself, wonders about her screams of Peeta. Even now, long after, the dreams of passion come, but then they collide with the nightmares of horror. That’s when Katniss knows it will do her no good to dwell on this, on him. She’s got to move on. Otherwise she’ll be caught in another cycle of despair and desperation.

It’s an even longer time before she can tell the horses about Prim. Sweet Prim, who brought joy to Katniss’s dark world. She tells them about Prim’s love of animals, about Lady the goat, and even that damn cat Buttercup. She misses her sister so much. She misses the knowledge that there was at least one person in this world who loved her for who she really was. Now that Prim is gone, really gone, Katniss wonders if she’ll ever have that kind of love again. She doesn’t feel she deserves it, but does anyone?

Finally she comes to Haymitch. She’s put him out of her thoughts for too long. The old drunk who exasperates her, yet understands her in his own way. She tells the horses about seeing him in The Hob, buying his liquor when she was younger. Her father was always kind to him, even if Haymitch was rude back. When Katniss asked her father about this once he told her, “Everyone’s got their own demons to fight, Katniss. Haymitch has more than most people. Why should I add to his troubles?”

She never used to understand why Haymitch would drown himself in that vile white liquor. That is, until she, herself, went through the games. Then she understood. She tells them about her first time meeting him on the train, how apathetic he was until he realized that both she and Peeta meant business. She wonders if he’s taking care of himself. Probably not, she thinks. Maybe someone’s helping him out now? She wishes good for him, that’s what she concludes.

She goes on and on like this. Day after day, afraid that if she skips a day she will forget. And the last thing she wants to do right now is forget. She wonders, if Haymitch were here now, what would he say? “Stay alive Sweetheart. Stay alive,” she imagines him saying with a sarcastic smirk on his face, “Stay alive…”

So she decides to do just that.
Author's Note:

As always, thank you to the wonderful titania522 for being my beta. You have challenged me and encouraged me, and without you this story would still be in my head and I would be waiting around for someone else to write it. I love you girl!

To the readers- for all of the views and readings, the favorites/audios/follow/anything's! Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love this little world and I am so happy to share it with you. Thank you for sharing it with me!

This is a story of Katniss Everdeen and her return to her home. It's about her growth and her healing. So I thank Suzanne Collins for creating this complex, all too human character- without her none of us would be here!

Enjoy!

District 12- Moving On

She’s had a few more dinners with the others, and now Katniss brought her ‘special’ stew. Thom gave her a pretty big hint when they went to the woods together, that hunting may not be as “off limits” as Katniss had thought. She’s gotten a few squirrels here and there, but she didn’t want to push her luck. Thom was the most impressed with the stew, complimenting her over and over on the flavor with a wink of his eye.

While she feels comfortable being with the others, and knows she is a welcome addition to their parties, she still isn’t one for talking. She still prefers to sit outside the group, watching the others. So she, and usually Leevy, end up sitting off to the side, just watching, observing really. Katniss enjoys the solidarity she feels with Leevy at this time as the only two Seam girls in the bunch. Only they and Thom understand what life was like for them before the war, how dire the poverty really was. It bonds them together now.

It’s during these dinners that Katniss begins to notice some of the looks that Rhea gives when she thinks no one is looking. Mostly she gives them to Peeta, although some are cast in Katniss’ direction. Were they looks of longing? Of envy? Katniss isn’t sure. She wonders if she should say anything to Peeta? Or maybe even Leevy? But what she and Peeta have is still new, still fragile in her eyes. She’s not ready to hear an answer she may not like. So, Katniss remains silent, but still aware of Rhea.

They’ve been dancing around each other for some time now, Katniss and Peeta. They work in the garden together some days. They talk in the yard when she’s coming home from the woods or time with Janie, or when he’s coming or going to the bakery. He comes for supper, they sit and talk. It begins as a quick grazing of hands and smiling shyly at one another. Then he’s putting his arm around her, holding her hand more frequently, little touches here and there. Katniss would often find him staring at her, of course, because she was staring back.

Just as he was getting ready to leave one evening, before he stood up, he took a deep breath, turned suddenly, and leaned over and gave Katniss a sweet, gentle kiss. Nothing much really, merely grazing her lips, but there was a promise in it. Then, with a smile on his face, he turned to go, leaving a happy, if confused Katniss, sitting on the porch.

As time went on, it happened more frequently. And soon the grazes to the lips turn into something more. The kisses begin to deepen. His hand on her face, her neck, in her hair. She reaches out to him, running her hand up and down his arm, running her fingers in his hair, holding the back of his head. They spend a lot of time this way, in the evenings.

Katniss realizes how much she has missed this, how hungry she was for it. This intimate contact with someone, with Peeta. It had been so long, that she forgot how good it was. But now that she has it, she’s not going to give it up easily. So any questions she may have about Rhea can wait, she decides. Because, at this point in time, it’s obvious to her that Peeta is here with her because she is the one he choses to be with.

Katniss also spends more time with Janie. It doesn’t slip her notice that many of the children in the Home aren’t there any longer, they’ve been adopted out to families in the community, and there are new, younger children in their place. This gets Katniss thinking about Janie. What would she do if Janie were adopted by someone?

Katniss doesn’t know when it happened, but little Janie has become a very important person in her life. Maybe it happened that first day they met, when the little girl found out Katniss was just a regular person, like everyone else. Not a real Mockingjay, no wings. It would break her heart if she couldn’t see Janie every day like she has been. It gives Katniss something to ponder.

“Oh Miss Katniss!” exclaims Janie breathlessly. “It’s so beautiful here!”

Katniss has taken Janie into the woods for a picnic. It’s Janie’s first time going into this forbidden place, so she is in a bit of awe at her surroundings.

“This is where I learned to hunt, and to look for food,” Katniss explains, smiling down at the girl. “When you’re a little older, I’ll take you down to the lake where my father taught me how to swim.”

“Really?” Janie asks excitedly.

“Yes, really,” Katniss smiles back.

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District 12- Moving On

"This is where I learned to hunt, and to look for food," Katniss explains, smiling down at the girl. "When you're a little older, I'll take you down to the lake where my father taught me how to swim."
“Miss Katniss,” Janie says, “can you tell me about your father again?”

“Miss Katniss” Katniss thinks. She’s tried to get Janie to just call her Katniss, but, like a little goose, the name has been imprinted on Janie and she just can’t let it go. Little Goose. So much like a Little Duck I knew…

There are many things about Janie that remind Katniss of Prim. Her blond hair, the way people can’t help but fall in love with her, the way she looks at the world as if it’s full of wonder and beautiful things.

But there are other things about Janie that are just hers alone. How she laughs at Buttercup when he gets into a scrape. How she’s interested in all things “Katniss”, even hunting and the woods. How she keeps to herself, unless you’ve given her a reason to like you. But what Katniss really loves about Janie is her ability to speak up for herself, even to Haymitch.

The other day, when Janie was visiting Katniss out in the Village, the geese had gotten loose again. After helping Katniss wrangle them up and put them back into the pen, Janie marched right up to Haymitch, who sat on his front porch the whole time just watching them do his work, and shook her finger at him, “Shame on you Mr. Haymitch! You need to do a better job taking care of those geese. If you don’t, Buttercup will eat them up, and I won’t even mind!”

Haymitch almost fell off his chair laughing at that, “Don’t need to worry about that one Sweetheart! She’s terrifying all on her own!”

“Miss Katniss!” Janie says, breaking Katniss out of her thoughts. Janie loves to hear stories of Katniss’s past, of her growing up in 12. Katniss tells her about her father, how he worked deep underground in the coal mines, under where the medicine factory now sits.

She had a happy childhood. It was uncomplicated, and though they were poor, Katniss knew she was loved and cared for. It was a time and a place that is gone forever, only these stories keep the memories alive for Katniss, and keep her father alive too.

They spend the afternoon in the woods. Katniss points out some of the berries and food they could forage. She makes sure Janie knows to never put anything into her mouth unless Katniss tells her that. Katniss rarely needs to be firm with Janie, but in this instance, Janie knows Katniss means business.

As the sun starts to dip in the west, Katniss takes Janie back to the Home. She needs to get back in time for supper. Peeta is coming over and she wants to make sure everything will be ready.

“Peeta,” Katniss says that evening after supper as they’re sitting on her porch. “I’ve been thinking about Janie.” She stops to think about what to say next. “It looks like a lot of the children from the Home have been adopted out… I’m just not sure what I’d do if that happened to Janie…”

“And?” Peeta says with a knowing grin.

“And?” Katniss answers, a bit confused. “What does that mean?”

“It means, ‘what are you thinking’?”

“I’m thinking I’d like Janie to come live with me.” This is the first time Katniss has said this out loud, but as soon as the words were out of her mouth she felt a weird mixture of both fear and confidence about the idea.

“So, you want to know what I think? You already know that answer. I think you’re going to have a little girl come live with you.” Peeta grins back.

“Will?” she asks unsurely.

“Yes, you will. And you will love that girl with the same fierce protectiveness that you loved Prim. Because you already do,” he answers confidently. “So tomorrow, first thing, I think you need to hightail it to town, talk to Thom, then head over to the Home and talk to Rhea.”

“Do you think it’s that easy?”

“Yes,” he answers confidently. “I do. Then, you’re going to come back here and make one of these rooms in your house ready for that girl so she can move in as soon as possible. While I’m in town, I’ll pick up some paint and we’ll decorate that room. And it will be a dream come true for her.”

“But what about you?” Katniss asks, still unsure.

“What about me?”

“Where do you fit into this ‘dream’?”

“Right here Katniss,” he says with a smile, putting his arm around her. “Right here beside you all the way.” And he gives her a squeeze.
It’s this familiarity, the two of them together again, a team, but more so, that Katniss is afraid of losing. So when she asks him where he fits, she’s asking because she’s afraid of losing what they’ve attained.

She realizes she’s misjudged Peeta once again. He’s there for her. He’s always been there for her. And with this new adventure with Janie, he will still be there for her. Although now, he’ll be there for both Katniss and Janie.

The next morning, instead of her required phone call to Thom, Katniss meets him in his office at 8.

“Hello Katniss! What can I do for you today?”

“Thom,” she speaks up nervously, fiddling with the hem of her shirt. “I’ve noticed a lot of the children from the home have been adopted out.”

“Yep, that’s true Katniss. That’s the goal of each of the Community Homes. Take care of children until someone is willing to adopt them. That way, all of the children who need to be cared for can be. It’s not a perfect system, but we are trying.”

“I was wondering though, what about me?”

“What about you?”

“Well,” she begins. “I’m wondering if I could adopt someone?”

“That would fall under Rhea’s jurisdiction. She has final say about placement of the children.”

“But, would I be allowed to? If Rhea thinks it’s OK?”

“Katniss, I know what you’re getting at. I can’t think of one person in Panem that would have a problem with you adopting Janie. If Rhea thinks it’s OK, then it’s OK.”

“But does she know about me? About my past?”

“She knows what everyone else in Panem knows. If Rhea had a problem with you and Janie, you wouldn’t be spending time with her now. Rhea may be young, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders. She knows what’s what when it comes to those kids.”

With a bit more confidence Katniss leaves Thom’s office and begins to head over to the Home. She hopes to see Rhea before she sees Janie, and she wonders if she should phone first. So, instead of heading to the Home, she turns and goes to the Bakery, hoping Peeta will let her use the phone.

“Well, well, well! This is a pleasant surprise! And a great pick me up after the morning rush!” Peeta exclaims as Katniss walks through the front door of the shop. This makes Katniss blush, but in a pleasant way.

“Can I borrow your phone?”

“What? No hello Peeta! Can I have some of your buns?”

“Ha, ha. Hello Peeta, hope your day is going well.”

“It is, we’re in our morning lull, so my assistants are on their break. I’m just straightening up out here. Come on back, I’ll show you the phone.” He says as he turns to go into the back of the bakery.

Katniss has only been to the front of the shop, so she can’t help but look around as they head back into the office area.

“Looks a lot like it did before…” and she pauses, afraid she’s brought up a memory.

“Yeah. It’s all I know. The layout, the ovens, they worked for us back… before… and it works for me now. Of course, the ovens are a bit newer, a bit nicer. Victor’s Pay is useful for some things” he says ironically.

“Here, the office is this way” and he leads her through a doorway off to the side. Once inside she sees there’s not much to the space. A desk with a lamp, a phone, papers strewn about it. On the walls she sees beautiful paintings.

“Peeta, are these yours?”

Peeta puts his arm around her, “Yeah. Some I did while I was in the Capitol, the scenes I could remember of home” as he looks to some of the landscapes. Katniss thinks one looks like the view from the stage after their first reapining. She remembers trying to imprint it on her brain, afraid it was the last time she would see it. Hoping it would give her strength for what was about to happen.

“Some I painted after I got back” and he points to pictures of the town in the process of rebuilding. “But my favorite pictures are out front. They’re of the Bakery before and the Bakery now… Reminds me that my family may be gone, but they still live on in my memories and others’.”

Katniss pulls back a bit at this. She doesn’t like to think about before. Doesn’t want to think about what it was like then. It’s too painful, even now. She knows it’s necessary, but it’s one of those things she’d rather set aside and move on from. “So, um, the phone?”

“Oh yeah! Right here” and he moves so she can get behind the desk to use it. “There’s a phone list on the wall above. Who are you calling? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Um, Rhea at the Home. I thought it would be better to phone ahead. I didn’t want to run into Janie just yet.”

“Oh! Does this mean what I think it means?” He smiles teasingly.

“It does Peeta. If Rhea approves, and Janie wants to, it looks like Janie will be coming to live with me.” Katniss is afraid to hope too much, but saying it out loud to Peeta gives her some confidence.

“I wouldn’t worry Katniss. I’ll go out front to give you some privacy. The phone number’s up on the wall under Home. Just come on out when you’re finished.” He kisses her gently, and he walks out of the office, closing the door behind him.
Katniss takes a big breath, picks up the phone and begins to dial before she can talk herself out of it.

"Rhea, it’s Katniss…"

Katniss heads back to the Justice Building. She’s meeting Rhea there to sign the papers. She’s part giddy just thinking about it. In a matter of a week or two Janie will be living with her. She’ll be responsible for another person. It’s overwhelming at first. She still has her days when it’s hard to get out of bed, but since she’s been with Janie, those days have gotten fewer and fewer. Other’s know she struggles with those dark days, but no one has said this in order to discourage her from adopting Janie. Maybe they all think it will be good?

After signing the papers and discussing with Rhea what the best timeline for Janie’s move would be (the next week, before the new school year begins), Katniss makes another unscheduled stop.

"Hello Katniss!" Anya exclaims. Their visits have gotten fewer as time has gone on. Now Katniss checks in with her occasionally just to touch base, but she is forever grateful that Anya always has an open door for her.

"I’m doing something I never thought I would, Anya. I’m adopting a little girl." Katniss sits on a chair opposite Anya.

"Well, this is a big step. Have you thought this through? What this might mean for you?" Anya is always so calm, but challenges Katniss just the same.

"I have, and I decided it might be worse for me, and for her, if I didn’t adopt her. But, I wanted to talk to you about… things…"

Anya knows exactly what those things are. "Those dark days? How are they?"

"Better. Truly, they are. And having to be up and ready to spend time with Janie each day has helped with that. That’s why I thought I could adopt her, that it could be a good thing. She helps me, you know? And I know I help her too."

"Having someone else to be responsible for does help, but it isn’t the answer to all of your problems."

"I know." she sighs. “But I know that Peeta will be there too. He helps, and Janie trusts him. He won’t be a stranger to her."

"Then, I guess you have your answer?"

"Yeah, I guess I do." Katniss feels even more confident about this idea now.

"My phone is always on for you. For whatever you may need. You know that, right?"

"I do. Thank you Anya. Do you think I should set up more regular times again? Maybe with Janie too?"

"I think that’s a great idea. I’d love to meet this girl that has touched you, Katniss. And it might be a good idea for her to have someone to help her through this transition as well. You may both love each other, but that doesn’t mean she won’t have some issues with all of this. She’s going to need some patience, you know that right?"

"I do. And thank you. Thank you for everything!"

She leaves with an appointment set for both her and Janie for the following week. One more item checked off of her list. Now back to the bakery for the final item on her agenda.

"Prim’s room Katniss? Are you sure?"

Katniss looks up from her spot on the floor in the middle of the room to see Peeta standing in the doorway, two cans of paint in his hands. She didn’t expect to see him there, didn’t realize the time. She’s been working in the room all afternoon, and just now realizes how late it’s gotten.

She takes a deep breath and stands, brushing herself off, “Yes. I said goodbye to Prim a long time ago. Now it’s time to bring some life back into this room. Plus, it is the best room, and it’s close to mine.” She says, defending her choice.

"OK, I just want to make sure you’re ok with this.” Peeta adds, bringing the paint into the room.

“Sae came by earlier and helped me move some things.” she says, nodding her head. “What was specifically ‘Prim’? I put into a box that’s up in the attic, right now. I gave some to Sae for her granddaughter, and then I bagged up all of the clothes. Sae promises to send them to another district. Says she doesn’t want me to have to worry about seeing Prim’s clothes on someone else in town, but they were too nice to just throw away.”

Katniss looks around the bare room- a bed, a dresser, a bedside table, and a nice sized closet. She’s starting to see some potential for a little girl’s room. And she’s determined this room will be Janie’s alone, and not Prim’s. It’s time.

"I know in my house there are tarps and paint supplies in the basement,” Peeta interrupts her thoughts. “I assume your basement has the same?"

"I’m pretty sure,” she nods. “Let’s go down and check. Then we can have something to eat and get to work on the room this evening.” Katniss says with determination.

Peeta brings the supplies up from the basement and up to the room while Katniss heats up some stew she’d had left over. By the time Peeta comes downstairs, after preparing everything upstairs,
“Looks like a fine meal for a job like this?” Peeta says encouragingly.

Katniss has been quiet. Determined, but quiet. She thinks Peeta might be afraid she’s going to sink into a bit of a depression. “It’ll fill us up just fine, get us ready for work.” she smiles at him and motions for him to sit. They dig into the meal, and Katniss fills Peeta in on her day.

Later that evening, as they sit on the floor of Janie’s new room, the walls all painted a soft pink, Katniss leans in to kiss Peeta.

“What was that for?” he asks a bit teasingly.

“Thank you. Thank you for helping me do all of this, for the paint, and the support. And for just being you.” She leans in for another kiss.

“Well, if that’s what it takes to get a kiss from you, I guess I’m going to have to find more projects to help you with around the house! Because kisses from Katniss Everdeen are something I’ve been enjoying lately, and I’d hate to lose them!”

“I don’t think you need to worry about losing my kisses Peeta” Katniss says, enjoying the banter. She never had the chance to be a girl like this. One that could tease the boys and wear dresses and worry about who was going out with whom. She was either worrying about her sister, worrying about The Games, or fighting a war. Then, when she was at the Ranch, there definitely wasn’t time for any of this. She’s finding that with Peeta, it seems to come naturally. She likes how it makes her feel confident. And she sees the way he looks at her, she sees the fire in his eyes. She knows he likes this side of Katniss too.

He leans in to deepen the kiss, but instead, Katniss pulls away and stands up. She offers him her hand, “Come on! Let’s go downstairs. The fumes are starting to get to me in here.” Before they leave, they open the windows and close the door to keep Buttercup out for the night.

Once they’re downstairs Peeta pulls her into his embrace. “You’re doing the right thing here, you know that right? And you know I’m with you 100% right?”

“Yes. I do. I appreciate you so much,” and she wraps her arms around his neck as they meet each other in the middle. These kisses, that at first were somewhat chaste, have begun to stoke a fire in Katniss that she’d almost forgot she had. She thinks about that first time they kissed, in the cave, the one that meant something to her. One that could tease the boys and wear dresses and worry about who was going out with whom. She was either worrying about her sister, worrying about The Games, or fighting a war. Then, when she was at the Ranch, there definitely wasn’t time for any of this. She’s finding that with Peeta, it seems to come naturally. She likes how it makes her feel confident. And she sees the way he looks at her, she sees the fire in his eyes. She knows he likes this side of Katniss too.

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This realization, which seems to have come from nowhere, hits Katniss hard. To know Peeta is an important person to her is one thing. But to love him? That’s something else entirely. She’s put all of this emotion aside for so long, because to dwell on it would only have fueled the depression she worked so hard to keep at bay in 10.

“Peeta”, Katniss says as she breaks the kiss. “What are we doing?”

“Well, last time I checked, when two people put their lips together, it means they’re kissing,” he says with a touch of sarcasm.

“No. I mean, what’s going on between us?” She didn’t intend to have this conversation now, but she also can’t seem to stop herself from asking the question either.

“I’d like to think we’re working on a relationship here,” he answers back nervously.

“Really?” she answers hopefully.

“Yeah, really! Katniss,” he responds, a bit of relief in his voice. “I know what I said before, in the games. You’re it for me. I still feel that way. The Capitol tried to change that, but all they ended up doing was muddling my brain and making me afraid. My feelings never went away, they just warred with the false memories they gave me. But, I’m hoping that you feel the same way about me?”

This is the last thing she thought they’d be doing tonight, but Katniss thinks it’s probably the best time. Because Janie is coming to live with her and there needs to be some security for both of them now.

“I do Peeta! I do. I was so afraid when I first came back. I was afraid everyone had left me and moved on. But you were always there. Even when I ran away from you, you stood by me. Until one day, I realized how important you were to me. I want this. I want us.”

With this declaration, Peeta can’t keep the smile off of his face. She can see him trying to not smile so big, but he’s failing. “Katniss, I promise you that I will be here for you and for Janie.”

“Always?”

“Always.”
One day, about 4 years into her sentence, it seems as if the fog has lifted. Katniss notices the sun shining, hears the birds chirping. She’s stepped out of the grey half life she had been living, and into the daylight. She has a long way to go, yes, but she realizes she’s gone a long way already. So much time has been spent grieving her sister, her friends, her past. She’s been living with the dead. Now she looks around, she sees that time has continued on. She’s going home soon. No matter how much she will always miss her sister, no matter how hard it will be, it’s time to attempt rejoining the living.

Little by little, there has been a change in the responsibilities at the ranch. Katniss still has her own assignments and chores, but she’s noticed one of the other ranch hands working with it. It’s one of the girls who helps out John most of the time. She’s a bit taller than Katniss, and looks to be a close to the same age, maybe a bit older. She’s not as dark as Rue was, but her eyes are just as brown. Her straight, dark hair is pulled back from her face, like Katniss’, by a bandana. She has the same hardened look that most of them have here, a look that says they have seen too much and have been gone from home far too long.

“Hope you don’t mind,” the girl interrupts Katniss’ thoughts. “Not that it matters anyway, since Maggie didn’t give me a choice. I worked in my family garden at home, and Maggie thought it might be best if I helped out with this one too. I kind of missed it anyway. Gardening that is.” And she steps into the garden and begins to weed.

“Oh, No… I guess not,” Katniss falters, because, like the girl says, it’s not like there’s a choice here anyway. “I’m… I’m Katniss.” It seems so weird to use her voice. She hasn’t spoken to anyone but Maggie, the horses, and occasionally the cook, in so long. What has it been? Four years? Wow. Katniss thinks. It’s been that long…

“I know who you are,” the girl looks up. “I’m LoRay.” she says as she nods in Katniss’ direction.

“Umm, sorry,” Katniss looks embarrassed, and feels rather foolish. Of course this girl knows who she is. Who doesn’t? It’s in this moment that Katniss realizes, if she were going to have to fulfill a criminal sentence, it really is best that she’s been put where no one from the outside can get to her. Right now, she can’t imagine what it would have been like to have all of Panem watching her every move over the last 4 years.

“Don’t worry about it,” the girl waves her off, and they both weed the garden in silence. When they are through with the weeding, Katniss goes to the kitchen to get bowls to put the harvested vegetables in. Cook seems to have been watching them because she meets Katniss at the door with two bowls and a small smile on her face. As Katniss heads back out to the garden and hands LoRay her bowl, she begins to wonder if Maggie and Cook didn’t put her and LoRay together for a reason.

It goes on like this for a few days before either one of them will speak again. They give each other a nod of recognition, but that’s about it.

“I think what you did was brave,” LoRay says one day out of the blue. They are back in the garden, separating some of the plants, weeding, and watering. The sun is warm and the garden is beginning to flourish.

“What?” Katniss asks, stopping what she’s doing and looking up from the task at hand.

“You know, everything really. Volunteering for your sister. Becoming the Mockingjay. I remember watching you on TV.” LoRay continues as she begins to dig up and separate some of the carrots.

“Yeah, well, I guess. I mean, it’s not like I did anything because I wanted to. I didn’t plan on any of it. It just happened, you know?” Katniss is looking anywhere but at LoRay, wiping her hands on her jeans to distract herself.

“I know,” LoRay answers. “Just knew of them. From school and stuff.”

“Yeah. Up until the 74th Games it was just that way for me.” Katniss nods, and goes back to work.

These short bursts of conversation during chore time seem to happen more and more frequently. A question here and there, nothing too detailed. But, after a time, it seems the two girls become a little less nervous, a little more at ease.

Katniss finds she’s sitting by LoRay more often than not at the dinner table, and they are teamed up for chores on a regular basis. Katniss is still guarded around her—she has too much of a history of hurt to trust anyone here. She refuses to open up to her. On the other hand, after all of this time, she doesn’t mind the company either.
Eventually, they talk about each other’s districts, what people did for fun. LoRay talks about swimming in the river, climbing the cliffs that surround her home. Katniss doesn’t share too much, just that she was too busy taking care of her sister to worry about having fun. They talk about their families and friends. It’s a pretty one-sided conversation, really. LoRay talks more than Katniss. It seems LoRay isn’t too worried about oversharing, and she doesn’t push Katniss to share more than she wants, which isn’t much.

Katniss learns that LoRay’s family was a part of the rebellion from the beginning, even before Katniss volunteered for Prim. She has no sisters and lost her only brother in the attack on the dam that shut down power to the Capitol during the war. Her parents both fought as leaders in their district. LoRay was practically raised for the rebellion. Her babysitters and friends were children of the other leaders in her district. She learned at an early age what was appropriate to discuss with the family and what was not ok to tell others. She learned when to talk and how much to say. She learned to listen to what was being said, and what was not being said.

“Did you know Coin?” Katniss asks.

“Coin? No, of course not. But my parents, as leaders in 5, were in regular communication with her. We never saw her. I didn’t even know what she looked like until the war started. Didn’t think too much about her, just that she was in 13 and willing to help overthrow Snow. That’s all we cared about, it’s what we were focused on.”

“What did you do? During the war?”

“I was part of a group that stayed in 5. We ran messages back and forth between the Peacekeepers who were on our side and the rebel leaders. We snuck information in and out of the Peacekeeper’s barracks. Did whatever we needed to do to find out information...”

“What were you doing in the barracks?”

LoRay gives her a pointed look, which takes Katniss a few beats to catch.

“Oh. Nevermind.” Katniss looks away, embarrassed.

“It wasn’t so bad, really. Mom and Dad hated that I did that. But that’s how we found out about the weaknesses in the dam, when the Peacekeepers were changing guard duty, when new Peacekeepers were being sent into the district. New strategies that were being planned. And if I closed my eyes, I could pretend I was somewhere else. Anywhere else, actually.” LoRay says a touch defensively, like she’s had to explain herself before and is tired of the accusations.

“Sorry. I never thought about what other people had to do in order for us to win the war. I think there is a lot I still don’t know.”

“Well, like I said, it wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened. I’m just glad it’s over now, really.”

That’s why LoRay is at the Ranch. She knows too much. Too much about the Capitol and it’s Peacekeepers. Too much about Coin, too much about the underside of the rebellion. Plus, there were people that didn’t know LoRay was on the side of the Rebellion, they thought she was a traitor for sleeping with the enemy. Since her family was all dead by the end of the war, she had no one else to watch out and defend her. Moving her to the Ranch was the safest place to put one of the most effective double agents in 5.

Katniss doesn’t ask anymore about what LoRay had to do. She knows all too well that people will do what they have to do in order to survive.

“I’d stay away from John still, if I were you” LoRay volunteers one day as they are giving the horses a rub down.

“Oh don’t worry about that.” Katniss snorts, shaking her head back and forth. “I don’t know what I ever did to him though.”

“You don’t know? Really?” LoRay asks incredulously.

“I don’t. Believe it or not, there is a lot I don’t know, I didn’t know. Seems I was OK to inspire a rebellion, but not fit enough to give information to.”

“Huh. Interesting.”

“Yeah. Really interesting. Peeta and I were sent into that arena and we knew nothing. I think we were the only two in there that didn’t have a clue. Peeta was tortured for information he didn’t have. When I was in 13, I was trotted out and made pretty for the propos and the camera’s, then dismissed. They gave me just enough information at first. Not anything that might make me change my mind,” she says passionately, thinking of the time she and Finnick watched Peeta’s interview but no one, not even Gale, saw fit to tell her. “Wouldn’t want to lose the support of the Mockingjay, right?” she asks sarcastically.

“I had no idea.” LoRay says astonished.

“Yeah, like I said, we didn’t either.”

And they go back to their chores.

The next day LoRay tells her about John. “His wife was killed in the Quarter Quell. Left him with 3 young kids.”

It dawns on her then, “Wait! John is from 8? Is he Cecelia’s husband?”

“Yeah. That’s why he’s so angry. I don’t really know why though. He and Cecelia were both involved in the rebellion from the beginning. She had her own experiences from being a Victor and they both were afraid the children would be reaped.”

“How do you know all of this?” Katniss asks. She’s not sure she trusts LoRay.

“Oh, you’d be surprised what you can learn if you sit and listen. John likes to rant a lot. I just went along with him. Easier that way.”

“Why did they have them? Kids? I never could have done that.”

LoRay looks at Katniss side-eyed. “What about your baby? You were pregnant going into the Quarter Quell.”

Katniss looks away from LoRay at this. “That was a lie Peeta made up to gain sympathy” she says quietly.

“Really? Wow. When he said that, half of our people were furious. Said it would ruin everything
"Well, I guess it doesn’t matter now. It wasn’t true anyway.”

"Nope, I guess not. Huh. Learned something new today. Peeta’s a good liar. I believed it, and I’m pretty good at figuring that stuff out.”

“I don’t want to talk about Peeta,” Katniss says suddenly. She doesn’t want to think about Peeta. Because thinking about him brings up all kinds of questions in her mind. Questions that she’s put off thinking about. Where is he now? What is he doing? Does he have a girlfriend now? Has he forgotten about her? He was a good liar, was anything he said true? These are the questions that swirl around in her mind. Questions she can’t get an answer to. Questions that just lead to more questions. Questions that bring up doubt. And she can’t think about any of that now.

Katniss then props the pitchfork against the barn wall and walks away to another part of the ranch yard. Their conversation is over for another day.

That night, she has trouble falling asleep. Instead of thinking about Peeta though, she can’t get her mind off of Cecelia and her children. How they clung to her at the Reaping.

The next day they, are back in the barn, moving hay around. Katniss asks LoRay about the children. She needs to know they’re ok now, that they’re safe.

“Oh, they’re fine. John said that as soon as the Reaping was over, and the attention was taken away from the district and focused on the Quell, he put the kids in a safe home. It was all prearranged. They’re still there. John was able to check on them before he was sent here. When he goes home, they’ll get back together.”

“So why does he hate me? Sounds like he knew what the odds were. Plus, if he’s here, he knows more than the average person.”

“He’s just looking for someone to blame, and you happened to be perfect for that. Plus, you’re the Mockingjay. Cecelia died protecting you and Peeta. The country fell into disarray, and you and he both ended up here. You’re just an easy target, that’s all. But I’d still stay away from him.”

Katniss ponders this. She wonders if it would do any good to talk to John now. Probably not. She sees how he still looks at her, like he’s just waiting for her to say something, anything, so he can attack her again. She chooses to stay away from him. Her time is almost up, she doesn’t want to do anything that might jeopardize her leaving here.

After about a month of working together every day, LoRay stops what she’s doing and looks at Katniss. “I used to hate you, you know, when you first came here? I couldn’t stand to look at you. I hated that you were just this girl from 12, but you had so much influence, when my family and I, and everyone I knew worked so hard and all they got for their troubles was death. And then, you went and killed Coin on top of it all. The one person we thought would lead us into a new Panem.”

This sets Katniss back. Knowing that people hated her, still hate her. That she was blamed for Coin’s death by people who didn’t know the full story. “I’m sorry,” Katniss flounders. “I’m really… really sorry.”

What more can she say than that? Can she defend herself? Does she want to? She knows the truth, but what good would it do to tell it all now? Surely it will all come out, if it hasn’t come out already. Surely people are already talking about what happened behind the scenes in the war.

Instead, she looks down and tries to keep her emotions in check. She won’t let this girl see her crying, see that she’s hurt her with her words. She’s the Mockingjay, dammit. To give in to this would be releasing a dam of emotions that she might not be able to stop. And she will not let that happen. Not now. Not here.

“I don’t hate you now though.” LoRay concludes. “I’ve watched you this whole time. You’re not who everyone said you were. You’re not who I thought you were either. You’re just a girl, like me. I get that now. You were just trying to survive and take care of your people.”

At this, LoRay walks away, leaving Katniss standing there.
I want to thank you all for your patience with this chapter! There is a lot happening, but it's all good. I want to thank my long-suffering Beta Titania522 for her patience, for finding all of the times I use the word "there" when it isn't needed, for finding all of the capitalized letters that needed to be lower case, and for giving me such honest feedback—every time I might not have thought I wanted it. She has taught me, through her comments, how to be a better writer. When I began this story, it was difficult for me to put more than 2000 words together for a chapter. I have discovered that the more I write, the more I write! So thank you my friend!

I was informed the other day that I began reading The Hunger Games three years ago. If I only knew then what I know now, how my life has been on an Everlark spiral ever since...

Of course I thank Suzanne Collins for Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark. Where would we be without our Star Crossed Lovers from District 12?

“Miss Kammis! Miss Kammis! I get to live with you! I get to live with you!” Janie yells as Kammis walks into the Community Home.

“I know Janie!” Kammis laughs, happy herself with the little girl’s enthusiasm. “I’m excited too!”

“Miss Rhea told me last night that I get to move to your house and live with you forever and ever!”

“I know! I know!” Kammis laughs as she bends down to give the girl a hug. “So, how about we get your things and get a move on?”

Janie doesn’t have too much, just some clothes and a beloved doll. The rest Kammis will buy once Janie is settled. And while Janie shed some tears leaving the Home, by the time they are on the path to the Victor’s Village, she is all smiles and talking a mile a minute.

“I am so happy Miss Kammis! All of my friends were going to live with new families and I was so afraid I wasn’t going to go to one. But when Miss Rhea told me about you, I jumped up and down! Do you think Buttercup will like me there all of the time? He won’t mind, will he?” The little girl can barely hold her excitement, as she practically bounces down the lane. Kammis knows she’s made the right decision, but she also wonders how tired she’ll end up being because of it.

“Buttercup will just have to learn to deal with it. But I’m sure he won’t mind,” Kammis smiles down at the little girl, squeezing her hand. “I’m happy too, Janie. I’ve been thinking about you ever since we met. I know this is going to be perfect for both of us. For all three of us really—me, you, and Buttercup.”

Janie’s transition to Kammis’ home, while overall very positive, does have a few bumps along the way. Janie was quick to pick up on many of her friends leaving the Home and going to live with new families. So when she found out she was going to live with Kammis she was overjoyed. She was happy with the room, especially when she found out Peeta and Kammis painted it her favorite color.

Once she moved in though, she had a hard time accepting that she was going to live there permanently. “I’m going to live here forever, right Miss Kammis?” she would ask almost every day, as if waiting for Kammis to take her back to the Home.

“Yes Janie. It’s you and me and Buttercup now. We’re a team, we’re it! For now and forever!” Kammis replies, encouraging the little girl. “Now, let’s look at this catalogue and see if there is anything in here you might like?”

“You mean I can choose anything?” Janie asks, incredulously.

“Well, almost anything! We’ve painted the walls, but we need to decide what pictures you might want up, and what kind of sheets you’ll like. And maybe a few toys too,” Kammis smiles at her.

“Do you think Mr. Peeta will paint me a picture? A big one on my wall?”

“Like a mural? One that covers the whole wall?”

“Yes! I want it to look like the meadow!” Janie replies enthusiastically.

“I am sure if you asked him nicely, he would definitely paint one for you! Or at least something similar.”

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It started out pretty standard. While Peeta was painting the mural on Janie’s wall, Janie decided to ask for lessons. Peeta had been teaching Janie how to paint, and after he left one evening, Janie spilled some of the paint on the carpet in her bedroom. While Kammis was annoyed, she didn’t say much to Janie. She just figured it was standard for little girls to have accidents like that. Janie started wearing her pants, even when she was right by the bathroom. And at night, the nightmares came. Kammis would hear Janie saying, “Don’t leave me!” in her sleep. This is when Kammis started to put some pieces together.

“I have some concerns about Janie” Kammis tells Anya, stopping by one day after she drops Janie off at school.

“Oh! Come on in, have a seat. Tell me what’s going on?”

Kammis details what has been happening as Anya sits quietly, nodding her head every so often.

“Tell you what Kammis, bring Janie by tomorrow after school. She and I can have a little talk. I’d like you to stay too. It might be good for you to hear what’s going on.”

The next day, after a quick stop at the bakery for a treat and to say hello to Peeta, Kammis and Janie make their way over to Anya’s office. Anya has it set up a bit differently than when it’s just Kammis and Anya. Instead of two comfy chairs, there are blocks and dolls and other toys. Anya tells Kammis she’s going to go about things differently with Janie, since she’s so young. She’s doing what she calls “play therapy”. It’s where Janie gets to play and Anya will observe, and ask questions as she goes along. Kammis is invited to stay and watch, as it might be informative for her
as well.

Janie loves the idea of playing, and she gets down on the floor to build with the blocks and to play games. It’s pretty typical play for Janie, but Katniss notices that when Janie plays pretend with some of the smaller people, she only really plays with one person, one that looks the closest to Janie. This goes on over the course of a few weeks, as Peeta has asked Katniss to bring Janie by once a week.

After the first few sessions, Katniss asks Anya about it. “Why does she play like she’s the only one? She never plays like I am there, never even plays like Rhea or any of her other friends are there?” She’s trying not to be hurt by all of this, after all, Janie is just a little girl.

“Katniss, you have to understand, that from Janie’s earliest memories, she is the only one she’s been able to count on. Everyone she has ever known has left her in some form or another. Her parents did what they had to do, but she’s too young to understand any of that. Thes Gale and Cressida bring her here and leave her in a strange place. She’s with Rhea and Leevy for five years, and then she leaves them and she goes with you,” Anya gently says. “She’s only known you for just under a year, how is she to know you won’t leave her too?” Anya notices the look of recognition on Katniss’ face. “Does this sound similar to anyone you might know?” Anya finishes off with a small smile.

“Yes, it does.” Katniss nods. She knows all too well the feelings Janie is experiencing. She couldn’t process them when she was 11, how could she expect Janie to process them now? From that moment on, Katniss make a vow that she will never leave Janie. Not that she was ever going to, but seeing Janie like this, through her own eyes, solidifies that. Katniss and Janie are a team. Nothing will separate them.

Summer slips into fall, and Katniss and Janie set up a routine. Peeta even joins them most mornings for breakfast. He’s changed his work schedule so he can be there more often when Janie is around. Then after Katniss takes Janie to school and Peeta goes to the bakery, Katniss spends time in the woods. Sometimes she hunts, but mostly she walks. She gathers some fruit and herbs for Peeta to use at the bakery or home, she spends time at the lake, sometimes going for a swim on the warmer days. Then she’s back in town in time to pick Janie up from school. Most days they stop by the bakery to say hi to Peeta (and Peeta always slips a cookie to Janie, even when Katniss tries to tell him not to). If they aren’t meeting with Anya that day, they head home. While Janie does what homework she’s been assigned by Delly, Katniss prepares dinner for the three of them.

It’s a simple life, and a simple routine. What Katniss has learned through everything that has happened, is that simple is best. Routines are good. She’s almost happy most days.

But then a series of events happens to upset this little routine. Soon fall turns into winter, and the anniversary of Prim’s death looms. Katniss is prepared for this, having been speaking to Anya about ways to handle this, the first anniversary of Prim’s death since Katniss was released. It’s been six years, and while on the one hand it seems like a lifetime ago, it also seems like yesterday.

If it had just been the anniversary, Katniss could have handled it.

But, after attempting to go into the woods and finding the snow that has fallen made it nearly impossible, Katniss is forced to go back home after dropping Janie off at school. This leaves Katniss with a lot of extra time on her hands and not much to do. Between her and Janie, the house stays relatively clean. She never liked the television shows put out by the Capitol, and none of the books on the shelves are of any interest to her. She finds herself sitting alone with her thoughts more often than not.

One day, not too far off from the anniversary, Katniss decides to phone her mother. They talk, however infrequently, but Katniss thinks it’s important to touch base with her at this time. Katniss had a wonderful relationship with her mother before her father died. She remembers the fun things her mother would do with her and Prim when they were younger. She decides it’s time to tell her about Janie, thinking that her mother might enjoy knowing there is a new little girl she can spoil.

“Hey mom… no, things are good. Really they are. Yes, I’m still meeting with Anya. Yes, she’s helping me… I know mom… I miss her too… I… umm… have some good news though! No not that kind of news… No mom… No, not that… Yes, he is good… Yes, I’ve got those pills… Yes, I’m taking one a day… I don’t know why though… I know it’s important to be prepared, but it isn’t like that between us… I know, it could be but it isn’t now… OK fine, I’m taking them!… But… Mom, listen! I, uh, I’ve adopted a little girl… Yes! Her name is Janie and she’s the sweetest thing… No… Yes, I do know what I’m doing… Yes, it’s OK with everyone… Yes, even Thom thinks it’s a good idea… Anyway, mom, I was wondering if you might want to come visit? Meet her? Oh, yeah, no. Sorry, I didn’t think about that… No, I can’t go to 4, you know they won’t let me… I know you’re busy… No, it’s ok. Yeah… Sure… Maybe I can send a picture?… Oh, yeah, I’ll let you go… I miss you…”

Katniss hangs up the phone, feeling worse than before the call. That was the longest conversation she’s had with her mother, yet she feels even more distant from her than before. Her mother is always too busy, she’s buried herself in her work it seems, and while she has time to send birth pills… Yes, I’m taking one a day… I don’t know why though… I know it’s important to be prepared, but it isn’t like that between us… I know, it could be but it isn’t now… OK fine, I’m taking them!… But… Mom, listen! I, uh, I’ve adopted a little girl… Yes! Her name is Janie and she’s the sweetest thing… No… Yes, I do know what I’m doing… Yes, it’s OK with everyone… Yes, even Thom thinks it’s a good idea… Anyway, mom, I was wondering if you might want to come visit? Meet her? Oh, yeah, no. Sorry, I didn’t think about that… No, I can’t go to 4, you know they won’t let me… I know you’re busy… No, it’s ok. Yeah… Sure… Maybe I can send a picture?… Oh, yeah, I’ll let you go… I miss you…”

A few days after the phone call, Katniss is over at Peeta’s helping him clean out some of his things. He’s looking for a recipe for cookies he was thinking Janie would enjoy.

“Peeta, who is this Annie’s holding?”

“Oh hey! That’s where that thing went! That’s her son.” He answers with a surprised tone.

“Son? Annie has a son?”

“Well, yes, she does. It’s a good idea… Anyway, mom, I was wondering if you might want to come visit? Meet her? Oh, yeah, no. Sorry, I didn’t think about that… No, I can’t go to 4, you know they won’t let me… I know you’re busy… No, it’s ok. Yeah… Sure… Maybe I can send a picture?… Oh, yeah, I’ll let you go… I miss you…”
When Finnick left for the Capitol, during that last offensive. She seems to be doing pretty well with him. Your mom helps out a lot, I guess,” his voice drifts off.

Katniss tries hard not to let the hurt show on her face when she hears this. After all this time, and after everything she's gone through, she doesn't know if she'll ever get over the loss of her mother. Her old bitterness is reappearing again. Especially since her mother is apparently alive and well and happy to help anyone that isn't Katniss. Interested in other people's children, but not Janie.

"Let's see, you and me are a team, right Katniss?" Janie asks as she smuggles down to bed for the night.

Katniss smiles back at this question that has become more of a routine than an inquiry. "Yes, Janie, we are a team. Because of her mother’s indifference, Katniss becomes even more aware of the role she plays in Janie's life. She vows she will not be to Janie what her mother is to her.

"What about Buttercup?"

"Yep! Part of the team. You, me, and Buttercup."

"But what about Peeta? Is he part of the team too?"

Katniss smiles at this one. This is new she thinks. "Yes he is, but he has his own home to live in."

"Yeah. He used to come visit Rhea at the Home too. Will he come and visit you?"

"He comes to visit all of the time. He comes for dinner almost every night, you silly goose!" Katniss says, playfully giving Janie a poke.

"When he came to visit us at the Home, he used to stay after we all went to bed. One time I saw Peeta and Rhea kissing!” Janie giggles in that innocent way that only a young child can.

This takes Katniss back. She knows she shouldn't be jealous. Peeta has gone out of his way to be with her, and to show that he is committed to both her and Janie. But she can't get past the thought that, while she was locked away at the Ranch in 10 for five years, he was here, getting on with his life, raising another girl. Even her mother, off in 4, seems to have moved on to a new life far away from Katniss and District 12. She's busy, too busy to visit Katniss. Annie has her son, Johanna has her work in 7, Gale and Cressida have their work for the government. What does Katniss have? A criminal record.

Between the anniversary of Prim's death, winter coming to 12, Janie working out that she will be with Katniss forever, her mother not really having any time for her, or even telling her things, this added information hits her harder than she thought. It takes Katniss some time to work through her feelings, and she begins to retreat into herself. Each day Katniss has to talk herself into getting out of bed. She remembers having to do this many times after her father died. She tries her hardest to fight off the cloud of depression that seems to be looming over her head.

Each day Katniss makes herself wake, get Janie up and to school, then she comes home as quick as she can to climb back in bed. Delly tries to talk to her when she sees her at school, even Rhea tries when she sees her around town, but that just adds to her depression. Peeta stops by with baked goods and treats for Janie, and he helps Katniss around the house and with Janie. For a time it’s all she can do to get Janie up and off to school. Once Janie is off to school, Katniss goes back to bed, finding solace in the comfort of her pillows and blankets. She spends a lot of the day in her own mind, thinking about Peeta and Rhea. No wonder they were so happy that first day I saw them. What will I do? What if he wants her more? How will I handle that?

She knows she needs to speak to Peeta, she’s just not sure how to start that conversation. Peeta stops by with some bread, gives Janie a big hug and sadly looks at Katniss, "You should stop by the shop tomorrow?" he may ask. The answer is always the same though, "Maybe."

After a few weeks of this, Anya stops Katniss on her way home from dropping of Janie at the school. “Katniss? I'm glad to see you. How about we walk together?” she asks, although it’s much more like a command than a question.

Katniss isn’t really happy. All she wants to do is go home and close out the world. She suspects that’s why Anya wants to talk, which doesn’t make Katniss feel much better. “Oh, um. Sure Anya. Do we go to your place?” she replies, not feeling like she has any other option anyway.

“No, I’m thinking I’d like to go to yours today. I’d like to see how things are set up for Janie.”

Her place. Katniss realizes the dishes haven’t been done the past few days, and the house is in a general state of disarray. She had been doing so much better, keeping the house up. But since she started to slip into her depression, the daily chores went by the wayside. They walk in silence back to the Victor’s Village. Katniss isn’t sure what to say, but she begins to feel that anxiety coming back. She thought it was gone, but now realizes she was wrong. Her palms begin to sweat, and her heart begins it's faced paced rhythm.

"Here we are?” she says almost nervously as they walk up the front steps and she opens the door. "Let's go to the study, and I'll bring some treats?” Katniss says, hoping to keep Anya away from the kitchen and the other living areas, so she can’t see how far gone Katniss has allowed the house to become.

“Sure Katniss,” Anya says with understanding in her voice. And she makes herself comfortable on one of the chairs.

Katniss heads into the kitchen to put together a small tray. Just some tea, and some cookies she’s noticed Peeta’s been leaving. She sees some fresh cheese buns on the counter and has a sad smile. He’s keeping his distance, but still checking in. He’s really trying, she knows. She just doesn’t know what to do about it, that’s all.

“So, Katniss. Why don't you tell me what you've been up to lately?” Anya says as they settle into their chairs and have some tea.

“Oh, you know, just normal things. Taking care of Janie. Stuff.” Katniss says nervously, feeling the anxiety bubble up from within.
"How is it going with Janie?" Anya asks neutrally.

"So good. She’s one of the brightest spots in my day." She answers, glad to be honest with this one answer.

"I can see that," Anya says point blank. She’s normally not this forward with Katniss, normally less Katniss on the pace. But today it seems as if things have gone on long enough. It’s time for some straight talk.

"Katniss, I’m going to be straightforward with you. I’m concerned. There’s something going on with you. I could wait and see if you come to me, but, as a friend, I need to speak up, because you’ve got a little girl depending on you."

"You think I don’t know that?!" Katniss bolderly states as she looks Anya in the eyes. "She’s the only reason I get out of bed in the morning! She’s the only reason I leave this damned house most days!" Katniss can feel that her anxiety is causing her to react somewhat irrationally. Anya is just trying to help, and Katniss knows she needs it, but she hates the thought that she isn’t as strong as she once thought she was.

"I see that Katniss." Anya responds gently. "But what I don’t know is, what’s changed? What’s going on with you?"

"It’s just…" she doesn’t know where to begin, or even how to begin. She stumbles over the words, but soon enough, they, along with the tears, just tumble out, "it’s just that everyone’s lives have… I don’t know… gone on. While I’m over here, stuck in the past. Stuck paying for something I did almost six years ago. Something I would do all over again if I had to."

"Trust me Katniss," Anya says, putting her teacup down. "You may think you know what’s going on in most people’s lives, but you don’t really."

"I know that. But I look around and Peeta has this bakery. My mom has this whole life in District 4 that she tells me nothing about. Annie had a baby that I only recently found out about. Gise has a big fancy career in 2, and a life with Crossida. Johanna’s working in 7. And what do I have to show for anything? I’m still that crazy girl from 12 who killed the President."

"I might phrase it differently." Anya responds kindly. "You spent 5 years serving time for saving Panem from another dictatorship. You’ve come back to 12, and have begun to build a life for yourself. You have a town that supports you, a little girl who thinks the sun and the moon rotate around the earth just for you, and a boy who is head over heels in love with you! Sounds to me like you’ve got a lot going for you."

"You… you think he loves me?" she asks, ignoring everything else.

"Katniss, do you ever notice the way he smiles when you walk by? The way his whole face lights up when you look at him?"

Katniss listens to what Anya says. She does remember watching Peeta smile. It’s a smile that he saves just for her. If she hadn’t been overthinking his and Rhea’s relationship, she might have remembered that. Maybe her perspective about everything really has been wrong. The despair around her heart begins to crack and break away.

"I know. I know. But then I start to think about Prim, and Finnick, and everyone else we lost. It gets to be too much for me sometimes. When I was at the Ranch, I could deal with that stuff because I had a certain routine I had to perform every day. I couldn’t get around it, whether I wanted to or not. Here, I’m just not sure. I can make a schedule for myself, but I’m the one responsible to make sure I do it. No one else," she says, as she tries to hold back the tears. She still doesn’t want to be seen as weak. It’s still hard for her to be vulnerable, even with Anya.

"That is the toughest part of where you are right now Katniss." Anya says, leaning over and holding on to her hand. "You have to be the responsible one now. It’s your job alone. Maggie got you so far at the Ranch, and I can only get you so far here. The rest has to come from you. You have Janie to give you motivation, but you still need to find that internal motivation. What is it that’s going to make you get out of bed in the mornings, and stay out of bed? What is it that’s going to be that one thing in your life?"

"Other than Janie? Because, I know she’s not going to stay little forever. I don’t know Anya. I really don’t know…" Katniss says, wiping the tears that are now steadily falling.

"What did you do at the Ranch on those bad days? What motivated you?" Anya asks, levelling a look in Katniss’ eyes.

"Other than the guard with the gun that was always pointed in my direction?" she answers sarcastically, wiping away some of the tears. "Well, I sang some at first. That was nice. And I told the stories of the people I lost."

"Who did you sing to? Who did you tell those stories too?"

At this Katniss chuckles, and looks shyly away. "The horses."

Anya’s help but smile now too. "Well, I am sure those horses were good listeners."

"They were the best," Katniss can’t help but laugh, even as she wipes away more tears that have started to fall. She’s beginning to feel better, just from talking with Anya.

"Have you ever thought about writing down everyone’s stories?"

"Me? I didn’t even finish school. I don’t know…"

"Katniss, you can just write them down for you. No one else needs to see them. But it might help you to do this one thing."

"I can write down their stories," she says with renewed confidence. "Everyone deserves to be remembered."

"Well then, I suggest you think of a way to do that. I’d also suggest you think of things you do each day that give you joy. Make a list of these things, so that when the tough days come, you can go over that. Depression is something you’re going to have to deal with your whole life," Anya says. "If you can find ways to help yourself keep it together, the better it will be for you in the long run. And you’ll always have me to talk too, or someone like me."

After this conversation Anya asks to use the phone. She calls up a friend in the Capitol and orders paper and pens for Katniss. They are sent to 12 the very next day.
It gets easier to get Janie going in the morning. She comes home and sits at the table and writes on the paper Anya was able to order from the Capitol. She tells the stories she told to the horses as a child. She writes down the stories her father told her about his mother and the rest of her people. She writes down the story of the District 12 she knew before Snow burned it to the ground, of the shopkeepers she traded with, and the people in the Seam who struggled to make ends meet each day. She tells the story of her parents and their love. She writes about Prim, and Rue, and Finnick. She writes about Cato and Clove. She writes about Beetee and Wiress. She writes about Madge and strawberries. About Gale and hunting. Day after day, page after page of memories.

When she’s not writing the stories she thinks of the things that make her happy, that bring joy to her world. Like the way Janie’s hair feels so soft when she’s brushing it. How Buttercup looks like a fierce tiger cat when he hunts. The way the people in town have begun to greet her, like she’s just one of the other displaced settlers that have found their way to 12. The smell of the woods in the spring. The sound of the geese on the lake. The taste of fresh cheese buns that Peeta leaves every morning. Peeta. The way he talks to her, the way he looks at her, the way he smiles as he’s walking away.

She needs to talk to Peeta. There’s a rift between them that she put there. She needs to heal that, she needs Peeta back in her life. Or rather, after her conversation with Anya she realizes she needs to be back in Peeta’s life.

Peeta still stops by every evening, asks Janie about her day, brings Katniss baked goods from the shop, then quietly leaves. One night, about a week after that, she had their talk in her study, after a week of writing out her stories, Katniss asks Peeta to stay.

“I had some leftover squirrel in the freezer, and I made a stew. Would you like to stay?” she asks quietly, playing with her hair as a distraction.

“Sure Katniss?” Peeta replies. She can see the large smile he’s fighting to contain. It makes her smile a bit bigger too. “Let me go home and clean up. I’ll be back in about 30 minutes!” It isn’t hard to hear the excitement in Peeta’s voice, or miss the spring in his step as he walks away towards his house.

(end part 1)

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed I’ve changed the rating to this story. That is for events that will happen in the next chapter...
When Katniss is finished getting supper ready, she and Janie go sit out on the back porch. Winter still has it’s last chilly hold on them, but the late afternoon sun has made the porch the perfect temperature to sit all bundled up under a blanket and talk.

“Like Peeta, Katniss” Janie says as she climbs on her lap. She’s finally dropped the Mr. and the Miss. Since she lives with Katniss and sees Peeta most everyday, Katniss figures it was just easier to say their names.

“He is a nice man, isn’t he?” Katniss smiles back, brushing Janie’s hair away from her face, and thinking how Haymitch was right all of those years ago, that she could live a hundred lifetimes and never deserve him. He’s been there for her since before she even came back from District 10. He kept her house up and he kept Buttercup alive. He doesn’t blame him for anything that might have happened while she was away. Now that she’s thinking a bit clearer, she can understand why he might seek comfort in someone else. It still hurts a bit, but it isn’t the worst feeling in the world.

“Did you ever have a boyfriend Katniss?” Janie asks. Katniss has noticed that she’s been interested in the idea of boyfriends and girlfriends lately. Delly assures her that it’s perfectly normal for girls Janie’s age to be curious about such things.

“Well, that’s a big question Janie.” Katniss replies, not sure how to handle this one. She’s reminded of the time after the first games, when she ignored Peeta. When she stubbornly clung closely to Gale, even though they were never the same as they were before the first Games. She’s reminded of the engagement that was for the public, for Snow, and the hurt look on Peeta’s face when they decided to go ahead with it. She’s thinks about the second Arena, kissing Peeta on the beach that night and feeling the hunger that she first felt in the cave. That whole time in her life was a contradiction of feelings. Did she ever have a boyfriend? Really?

“There were two boys Janie,” Katniss begins. “One was my best friend. I thought he and I would always be friends, but sometimes things happen, and he had to go away.”

“Oh, that’s sad!” Janie says.

“It is. But that’s just the way it is sometimes,” Katniss sighs. “But there was always this other boy. He has blonde hair and the prettiest blue eyes. He has the nicest smile, and he’s probably one of the kindest people I’ve ever known. He’s always made me feel safe, he’s always protected me. I really like him Janie,” she smiles. “I like him a lot!” and Janie giggles as Katniss tickles her sides.

“Hey Katniss?” Peeta says as he climbs up the steps.

*How long was he there? Katniss’ eyes open wide in shock. Did he hear me? He’s got a smile on his face. Is it because he heard me? She tries not to be embarrassed. He may know how she feels. But to say it out loud to someone else, and have him overhear? She’s still wrapping her brain around that one.*

Supper starts out at a little awkward for Katniss. After these last weeks of her avoiding Peeta, she’s almost shy in speaking to him, and then with the thought that he might have overheard her and Janie on the porch, she tries so hard to not be mortified. But Peeta, as always, is quick to put her at ease. “Thanks for inviting me to supper tonight Katniss. It was a quiet day at the bakery, so I’m happy to have some company at dinner.”

“I hope everything’s going ok for you,” Katniss asks concerned, doing her part to keep the conversation going.

“Oh, yeah. The shop is going great. Some days are just quieter than others, that’s all. There’s a pattern to it, and today was one of those days. It’s nice because I can plan the schedule accordingly.”

“Well that’s good then,” Katniss says, trying to sound encouraging.
“Yep. So, after a day of just one or two of us working at the shop, it's nice to be with other people. Especially the two of you!” he adds with a smile to Janie.

Supper becomes much less awkward after this. While Katniss cleans up the kitchen, Peeta and Janie play a game of cards. As she starts to go into the room to join them, she hears the sounds of Peeta laughingly complaining that Janie is cheating, and Janie denying it through laughter. She stops and leans against the doorframe. Peeta pulls Janie onto his lap to read her a story. It's one of Janie's favorites and she always says Peeta does the best voices. It warms Katniss' heart to watch them. Everything about this, about tonight, feels right. After isolating herself all that time, she feels lighter than she's felt in weeks.

“Well little girl, I think it's time for bed.” Katniss waits until Peeta finishes his story, then she enters the room. “You have a big day tomorrow, I hear Miss Delly is going to take your class somewhere special!”

“Oh yes! We're going on a… field trip? I think that's what Miss Delly called it.”

“That's right! So you want to be all rested up, don't you? Rumor has it you might be going to the meadow on a picnic…” Katniss drags out enticingly.

“Okay….” Janie sighs. “Goodnight Peeta! I'm glad you came to dinner tonight.” She says as she goes to give him a hug.

“Me too Janie.” Peeta says as he returns her hug with a big bear hug of his own. “You have a good night and I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe Katniss will bring you by the shop for a cookie?”

“Peeta…” Katniss says warningly, although there is a small smile on her face.

“What? I just want to make sure she's well fed, that's all!” He replies as innocently as he can.

“Yeah, right.” she chuckles in response. Katniss knows better, but she can’t deny how happy it makes her that Peeta is not only interested in Janie’s welfare, but also willing to put these last few weeks of her isolation behind all of them. “Let's go, Janie! Off to bed!” And Katniss takes Janie’s hand as they walk up the stairs. Once she’s in her pajamas and in bed, Katniss tucks her in, sings her a song, and turns on the night light. “Good night, Janie-bear. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Katniss. I love you” she says as she closes her eyes.

“I love you too, Janie” Katniss watches her drift off with a soft smile on her face. She never dreamed she'd be in this position after Prim's death. With a little girl to love, who loves her in return. She adds this to the list of things that make her happy. Janie’s smile. Janie telling her she loves her. Janie sleeping. All things that help brighten her world.

“Stop it,” she answers, blushing. “You weren’t supposed to hear that,” she says, looking away.

“Oh, don't worry, you're secret is safe with me!” he teases, cautiously putting his arm around her shoulder. Katniss tenses at first, it's been some time since they've been alone like this. It doesn’t take her long to decide she's ok with it though, and she rests her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah, sure,” she smirks, and she reaches up to play with his fingers. “So, what have you been up to lately?” Katniss changes the subject.

“Oh, you know, the bakery, checking on you and Janie...” At this, Peeta sits up straighter, still keeping his arm around Katniss. He holds her like he's afraid she'll run away. “Listen, there’s something I need to tell you, but I kind of have a feeling you might already know.”

“Is this about Rhea?” Katniss sighs, looking away, but staying in his embrace.

“So, you do know.” He nods, somewhat embarrassed.

“Janie just told me she saw you kissing one time. That’s all I know. And, I also realize it’s none of my business...” she trails off.

“I'm so sorry Katniss. I was going to say something, but the time never felt right,” Peeta
interrupts. “And then you were avoiding me, and, well, everything I guess,” he says as if he's not sure how to label Katniss’ depression.

“You don’t need to be sorry about anything, Peeta!” Katniss tells him. “That wasn’t what upset me. It wasn’t about you and Rhea. Not really. It was part of what I’ve been going through, but it wasn’t the whole reason.” She continues holding on to his hand, she wants him to know she’s staying there. She’s not running away now.

“But still, I want to explain. I need to. It really was nothing.” Peeta continues on. “I was just so scared and lonely, and so was she. We were both here, alone. She had a boyfriend before the war, but once everything started, he went off to fight and she lost track of him. He never returned, so she came here to start a new life, and I came back here to find my life. We just ended up hanging around each other. She’s nice, and we were, we still are, good friends. One night, after I had stopped by to visit with the children, we ended up crying on each other’s shoulders, one thing led to another, and we started kissing. But it never went farther than that, I swear.” he finishes passionately, like he wants her to know for certain that is all it was.

“Peeta, you don’t owe me an explanation. You owe me nothing. The last you saw of me, I was kicking and screaming and begging Gale to shoot me. You have every right to move on and live your life the way you need to.” She’s not testing him really, just letting him know he owes her nothing. Because if anyone understands debt and owing, it's Katniss.

“Maybe that’s true, but being with another woman wasn’t what I needed then, and it definitely isn’t what I need now,” he says confidently. “You’re what I need. You have always been what I need.” At this he turns entire his body to look at her. “When I came back to 12, I worked so hard to get my life back, and I tried to keep up your place because I wanted you to have a life to come back to. I just got so tired. I got sidetracked there for a bit, started to feel sorry for myself. Then Rhea and I just had the one night where we kissed, that’s it. I felt so horrible the next day. I told her as soon as I saw her that I couldn’t do that again. There you were in 10, I know how you were doing, I knew what you were doing, but I didn’t really know anything else. All I knew was I couldn’t move on with my life when you couldn’t move on with yours.”

“And what about now?” Katniss asks, trying but failing to keep the hope out of her voice, to sound neutral, just in case.

“Well, I suppose that’s up to you. I mean it when I say you’re what I need. There is no one I’ve met that measures up to you. You have no idea- the effect you still have, Katniss.” Peeta stops to stare into her eyes. “I don’t want you to think I’m pathetic though. I’ve got a good life going. I’ve got the bakery, I’ve got good friends. I’m happy now. I mean, I still have flashbacks. Dr. Aurelius thinks those are something I’ll always have. But I’m content now, truly.”

“I’m glad for you Peeta.” Katniss smiles at this declaration. And since Peeta seems to be confessing, she feels it's her turn now. “There is no one I’ve met that measures up to you. You have no idea- the effect you still have, Katniss.” Peeta steps to stare into her eyes. “I don’t want you to think I’m pathetic though. I’ve got a good life going. I’ve got the bakery, I’ve got good friends. I’m happy now. I mean, I still have flashbacks. Dr. Aurelius thinks those are something I’ll always have. But I’m content now, truly.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Peeta smiles at her.

“I know, I know.” Katniss interrupts him. “That’s what Arya said. She helped me see my life from a different perspective. She gave me ideas for coping. Nothing’s perfect, but I do think it helps.”

“So, does this mean we can get back to where we were?” His hand caresses her cheek. “You don’t have to worry about me and Rhea, I swear.”

“Oh, I guess I’m not worried now.” She shakes her head slowly. “But I can’t say that the thought that you might be happier with her hasn’t crossed my mind a time or two.”

“But I wouldn’t be happier with her. I hope you know that. If I’m going to be happy with anyone, it’s going to be you.”

And at that declaration, Peeta leans in and kisses Katniss for the first time since she sank into her depression. It starts off soft, but soon she feels all of the passion he’s been holding in for the last while, and she allows herself to give in to it.

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“How do you remember them Peeta?” Katniss asks rather abruptly one day. It’s early spring and they sit by the fire at Peeta’s while Janie plays quietly with her dolls. They had all been out for a walk in the woods and decided to head back to Peeta’s for some hot chocolate.

Instead of answering with words, Peeta gets up and goes upstairs.

Katniss isn’t sure how to take this. What if he doesn’t remember? What if I’ve hurt him? Or set him off with another flashback?

Peeta has assured her that the flashbacks are few and far between, but she has seen one since they’ve reunited. It was quick, he just stopped talking and grabbed on to the edge of the counter.
Peeta comes back downstairs holding a notebook. He hands it to her, wordlessly holding it out for her to take.

When she opens it up, her eyes struggle to take it all in. They’re all here. Everyone Peeta and Katniss have ever loved. The detail Peeta has used leaves her breathless.

“Working with Dr. Aurelius helped me retrieve my memories, but being able to sketch them out helped make them real,” he says softly.

This gives Katniss an idea. “Peeta, remember my family’s plant book? How we worked on that together? Maybe we can make a book like that, only with the people we’ve lost? You have these pictures, and I have the stories. It could be something we could keep, always have?”

Peeta listens thoughtfully then breaks into a huge smile, “I think that’s a great idea!”

“I’ve already started some stories. Anya helped me get the paper. She said it would help with my depression, and it did. I think if we can put our two books together, it could be really something.”

They spend their evenings, after supper and after Katniss puts Janie to bed comparing notes and remembering lost friends and lost ways. Katniss looks at the pictures Peeta has created and while they are almost perfect, she adds a suggestion here and there. It’s amazing how just a slight change makes such an incredible difference in the portraits.

Peeta takes his turn reading what Katniss has written, suggesting stories along the way. With tears in their eyes, never too far from falling, they laugh together and smile at the memories. It’s therapeutic for both of them to go through this process together. They each support the other, and their bond continues to grow. Soon, it seems Katniss, Peeta, and Janie have formed their own little family.

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It’s hard for Katniss to believe how fast the time goes now since Janie moved in. The ebb and flow of the school year makes the months fly by. Before she knows it, it’s almost time for the school year to be over. Katniss begins planning activities for Janie to do over the summer. Peeta offers to have Janie spend time at the bakery, to give Katniss a break. “It’ll give you some time alone, and it’ll be good to have Janie around the shop. I was about her age when I started helping out my dad doing little things here and there.”

One day, Katniss looks at the calendar and realizes she has been back in 12 for almost a year. It’s a shock at first. In some ways it seems like she’s been here forever, and other ways it seems as if she just arrived.

She realizes she is no longer the scared young woman who ran off and hid in the woods that first day she saw Peeta. She isn’t the quiet, sullen girl who sat in Thom’s office listening to him tell her what she was and was not allowed to do. She looks at herself in the mirror and sees a young woman who has learned to trust again. Who has learned to open herself to others, to try to love. She’s proud of who she has become. There are still bumps in the road, still days she has to force herself out of bed, but those days are becoming fewer, and they don’t last as long.

But even with this newfound self-awareness, Katniss is still surprised the day she receives the letter. It’s signed by President Paylor herself.

Dear Ms. Everdeen,

According to our records, you have been released from permanent custody and into probationary custody for one year. In that time there have been no instances of rule breaking. You have proven yourself to be an honest and trustworthy resident of District 12. It is with pride that I release you from probationary custody. You are now a free citizen of Panem with all of the rights and privileges ensued. However, while your travel ban has been lifted, you still must pre-arrange any travel as a precaution for your own personal safety. Please bring this letter to your parole officer to have it verified.

Sincerely,

President Paylor

and in the president’s personal handwriting Katniss reads:

Congratulations Katniss. Enjoy your freedom. You have more than earned it.

As soon as Katniss reads this letter, she rushes to Thom’s office.
"Hello Katniss! I see you’ve wasted no time getting here!" Thom says with a laugh as Katniss hurries into the room.

"I can’t believe it Thom! Everything’s lifted? Really?" Katniss can’t keep the excitement from her voice.

"Yes, really. Oh, and by the way, that squirrel stew? All between you and me,” he whispers conspiratorially. “And now, well, now you can hunt and trade all the squirrel or whatever meat you’d like. But, as for the travel, we really do mean it when we say it’s for your own safety. Please don’t just rush off anywhere,” he adds with concern.

"Don’t worry, Thom. I have no plans on going anywhere. I’ve seen enough of Panem to last a lifetime!"

"All the same Katniss, just let us know in advance. We won’t intrude on anything, we’ll just make sure there is extra security for you.”

"Thanks, Thom. I do appreciate it.” And she does mean it. She's began to realize the great lengths people are willing to go for her, and she won't take that for granted.

"Now, how will you celebrate this event?” Thom asks with a wink as he hands back her paperwork, all signed and notarized.

"Not sure. But I’ll think of something!” she replies with a smile.

"Well, don’t make this the end of us Katniss,” Thom laughs good naturedly. “I still expect squirrel stew at our dinners!”

And with a smile on her face, and a wave goodbye, she heads over to the bakery to share her good news with Peeta.

"Where’s Janie tonight?” Peeta asks as he steps into the kitchen.

After Katniss finished up with Thom, she stopped by to invite Peeta to a special supper. She wanted to tell him her good new privately. Just as she was getting to her house, one of their neighbours called to invite Janie to spend the night. This is working out better than I could have planned! She thinks happily.

“She’s spending the night at Sarai’s house,” Katniss answers casually.

"Really? Don’t you think she’s a little young?” Peeta can’t keep his concern out of his voice. "Says the guy who can’t wait for her to help out at the bakery,” she teases, pulling him into a hug. "Relax Peeta. Sarai just lives in the house across from here. If there's a problem, she can come right home. This is good for her. She's finally at a point where she can trust that we're going to be here for her when she comes back. Let the girl have some fun!"

"Still…” he pulls her in closer.

"Peeta! Stop worrying. If she has a problem, she'll call. Plus, with you worrying, it makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong. You know that Anya, Janie, and I have been working up to this for some time now. It's important she do this."

"OK. I guess,” but he still acts like he’s uncomfortable with the whole situation.

"Come here Peeta,” Katniss says, and she pulls his face in for a kiss. “There. We can’t do that too much when she’s around anyway. She just complains that we’re too gross.”

"Well, I suppose when you put it that way…”

"I knew I’d get you to see the bigger picture.”

The kisses start off gently. They always start off gently, because that’s who Peeta is when he’s with Katniss. She knows this about him. She knows he just wants to protect her and keep her safe. It's just one of the many things she loves about him.

A few weeks into working on the memory book together, after working on his family page, an extremely emotional entry, Katniss invited Peeta to stay. She was concerned he might have a flashback and didn’t want him to be alone. That night, as they lay in her bed, she just held him. it
was the first decent night's sleep either one of them have had in a long time. They mostly just lay together, fighting off the nightmares. But it gives them time to reacquaint themselves with each other. They talk about those nights on the train, they feel each other's chests rise and fall with each breath. They kiss and allow their hands to innocently explore. Ever since that night, Peeta's stays became more regular, to the point that Janie would ask where he was if he wasn't there in the morning.

Soon the kisses that started out so gentle, deepen. Peeta's hand begins to stroke up and down her back, while the other runs up her neck into her hair. The hand on her back begins it's slow, painfully slow, trek around from the back to the front, then up to her breast. Katniss is hungry, but it isn't because they didn't have supper yet. In the hunger she first felt in the cave, then on the beach. She feels it now, in her living room. This time, though, it's just the two of them. No one hunting them. No one watching them. They are in their own world.

She pulls away from Peeta, the hand that had been gently massaging her breast falls to his side. She reaches out and grabs that very same hand, turns, and begins to walk up the stairs.

"Katniss?" Peeta asks questioningly. "Are you… are you sure?"

"Yes," is all she says in response, looking him in the eyes. One word, but so confident. So full of promise.

It doesn't take long to walk up the stairs. Once they're in her room, she turns and closes the door, pushing Peeta against it. She kisses him with all of the fervor she's been feeling for as long as she remembers, her hands cradle his face, holding him in place. His hands settle on her waist for the time being. She knows he's waiting for her, that this is her time.

Soon, or maybe an eternity later, her hands drop from his face and rest on his shoulders. She shifts her mouth away from his mouth as she places soft kisses along his chin and down his neck.

"Katniss… I… Are you sure?" Peeta asks again. Because if she wanted to stop now, he would understand. He would be devastated, but he would understand. "What about protection?"

"My mom’s been sending me pills. I'm good, we’re fine. Now, Shh. Peeta. Please? Now?" is all she can ask, as she kisses his neck by his ear. As soon as she says it, she knows it’s all she needs to say. His hands reach under her shirt, the one she’d so carelessly put on this morning. It's a pull over that he easily removes and drops to the floor. As he’s taking off her skirt, she begins to work on the buttons of his pants. As soon as the button pops open, it's a race to see who can get whose clothes off the fastest, without breaking the kiss. Soon they are both staring at each other, their breaths sync to each other. Peeta tentatively reaches up and strokes the outside of her breast, reaching his fingers between her bra and her skin. It's so soft there. "Your scars…" he starts.

"Yours too…" she replies as she traces one particularly long one that begins on his chest and wraps its way up his neck. It's all they need to say. A simple acknowledgement of the other’s struggles from what seems so long ago, yet just yesterday at the same time. Soon her both bra and underwear are discarded, like the other items of clothing.

He picks her up then, never breaking eye contact, and carries her to the bed. "I've been dreaming about this moment since I was 13 years old," he says with awe as he places her on the bed. "I never, ever thought we’d be here."

This causes Katniss to smile shyly. "I’m sorry I can’t say the same thing… " she begins, but he interrupts her. "Shh. It doesn’t matter how long we’ve wanted this. What matters is that we’re here now.” And he leans down and suckles her breast while he massages the other. Small gasps are the only sound Katniss can make.

"You’re… your leg Peeta?" She gasps, trying to tether herself to reality.

"It’s fine. I think I need it for now anyway..." He says into the space between her breasts. "For balance."

"Peeta," she softly says, and he looks up towards her face, and sees the smile she gives him. She bites her lip as she strokes his neck, his shoulders. He kisses his way up her body until he reaches her lips. His hand works it's way down between her legs, "You’re so wet…"

She feels his hardness on her leg, and it excites her in a way she didn’t think it could. She would love to explore all of him, but she knows there will be plenty of time for that later. Right now, it's all so new, so different. She’s never felt more right about something than she does at this moment. As she spreads her legs farther, to invite him to settle in between, she looks at him and asks, "Please? Now?" That's all the encouragement Peeta needs as he moves his hand away and he slowly works his way inside of her. It doesn’t hurt, not really. But it is a stretch she isn’t used to. Soon though, as his hips work their way back and forth, the feeling of uncomfortable stretching gives way to a feeling of bliss.

It's over almost as soon as it begins. Katniss still isn't sure what happened, but Peeta is panting
and apologizing over and over again. “I’m so sorry Katniss. I’m so sorry…”

“Why are you sorry?” she asks, beginning to feel a bit defensive and scared.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t last that long. That you didn’t get to feel what you should. I’ve just… I’ve never… I’ve waited and dreamed… I’m so sorry…”

“Stop apologizing Peeta,” she smiles softly, cradling his face. “It was lovely. You were fine. And, we’ve got a lifetime to make it better. To make it perfect.”

“A lifetime?” he says in awe.

“A lifetime,” she smiles back.

At this, he smiles at her and leans in to kiss her one more time. He moves his hand back to the point where her legs meet. “What are you doing Peeta?” Katniss asks, already beginning to feel the pleasure he gives her as he inserts his fingers and uses his thumb to rub her clit.

“Just trying something I remember hearing my brothers talk about. Finnick even tried giving me tips while we were hunting together in the jungle during the Quell,” he whispers in her ear.

“Finnick? What, didn’t he think you already knew what you were doing? I mean, you did get me pregnant and all,” she pants, trying to stay focused on her words, but losing herself in the pleasure.

“I don’t think he bought that whole story,” Peeta smirks as Katniss’ eyelids grow heavy with lust.

“Oh Peeta! Don’t stop, please!” She demands as the pressure mounts. It only takes about 5 minutes before he hears her scream his name.

When she comes down, she looks up at him and giggles for what she thinks might be the first time in her life. He smiles back as they settle in together, the light from the newly risen moon shining through the window onto the bed. “You giggled! Katniss Everdeen giggled!” Peeta says proudly.

“I did.” She smiles back. “But it’s our secret!”

They lay, legs entwined, her head on his chest, his hand stroking her bare back. There is so much she wants to tell him still. She hasn’t even told him that she’s been given her freedom back. But for right now, she’s content to lay here in his arms and let the world move on.

It’s Peeta who speaks first. “You love me Katniss. Real or not real?” He asks, hardening back to their time in the war, when he didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t.

“Real.” is all she answers, and she softly smiles as they settle into each other.
"It Was a Sin to Lock Them Up"

Chapter Notes

Here it is! The last District 10 chapter! I am very excited about this one too. I hope it answers some questions you may have, and if it doesn't, feel free to ask me. And while this might be the final District 10 chapter, I still have the Epilogue yet to come. Thank you for all of the support I have received. And thank you to the best beta and most enthusiastic supporter of Everlark Fanfiction Titaniad22! Your encouragement, kind words, and gentle nudges have made me a better writer. You are a gift to our fandom, love.

"I have to remind myself that some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice. But still, the place you live in is that much more drab and empty once they're gone."

Stephen King, The Shawshank Redemption (via lonequixote)

"Hey Mockingjay! What's up with you? No more singing?" John's begun to annoy Katniss again. She's not sure why, maybe because she's been paired up with LoRay for awhile now? Or maybe John's just an asshole.

"You know, I've been thinking. I remember how much screaming you did when you first came here. Do you think you'd scream like that if you were under me?" he laughs derisively.

"Fuck off John." she says calmly as she continues on with her work. Ugh. He's such an asshole, she thinks. Katniss has learned to ignore him. He still angers her, and she still has to work on keeping that in check. However, she also has to chuckle to herself. If my mother were here she would be appalled by my language. I guess almost 5 years at a prison work ranch will do that to you.

"OOO! She's got some bite to her today!" he says, to no one in particular. "I'd love to test that out! Aren't you lonely by now? I mean, it's been almost five years and no lover boy. Don't you miss him yet? What do you do in that cabin all by yourself? Do you re-live the memories?" He's so crude, and she knows he's doing this just to get a rise out of her. "You know what, though? How satisfying could he really have been? Wouldn't you rather take a tumble with a man who knows his way around a woman's body?" And he walks over to her, stands directly in front of her, his toes almost touching hers. He just won't stop, he goes on and on.

"Fuck the hell off John, and leave me the hell alone." Katniss seethes, then, before she can even think it through she spits in his face.

He's shocked and angry at first, Katniss can see it on his face, but he won't let on to the others. "Aw, c'mon Mockingjay. I won't hurt you. Too much..." and with a wink and a lustful scan up and down her body, he walks in the opposite direction, wiping his face.

Katniss can't keep her skin from crawling. For once she's glad there are guards with guns around. For once she feels safe enough. He never touches her, only gets close and says those crude comments. Can't believe Cecelia was married to that man, had three children with him. She didn't know her that well, but from what little she did, she didn't expect that.

She remembers Cecelia from the reaping of the Quarter Quell- how Effie seemed so distressed at her name being called, how the children ran up to her after her name was called, how she had to peel off her three children while trying to appear stoic. She remembers talking to her during their training sessions, how she tried to help Woof by not letting him eat the poisonous bugs. At the time Katniss thought Woof didn't really know what was going on. Now though? Now she thinks Woof was on to something: die in training on his own terms instead of waiting to be killed in the arena.

Memories of the arena bring back those feelings of sadness she had when Cecelia's face lit up the sky at the end of the first day. She must have died in the bloodbath at the Cornucopia. Katniss doesn't really know how, she never really thought about it until now. Now that she's faced with an angry and bitter husband, who is hell bent on making Katniss' remaining days in 10 as miserable as possible, she remembers those three kids. The kids. For Katniss, every dealing with John, since finding out he was married to Cecelia comes back to those kids. She tries to remember this when he gets in her space, gets disgusting. She hates him. Until she remembers those kids. Then she's confused all over again. Because how could a father of three be as disgusting as John is?

"Hey Mockingjay, how about I visit you tonight?" John says the next day, as they're walking out of the big house on their way to do their chores.

"Fuck. You." She simply replies. But as she thinks about it more, she decides to engage him further. Stepping, she turns to him, "You know, John, I don't know what your problem with me is. I really don't. But I didn't kill her.

He narrows his eyes while his face darkens at this statement by Katniss. "Who do you think you are?" he practically spits at her. "How dare you talk to me about her?" It seems Katniss has touched on something.

"I didn't know her well John, but that doesn't mean I didn't like her." She tells him calmly. "You know what she did in training? She helped out Woof. She wouldn't let him eat the poisonous bugs. And I could tell from watching your kids hold on to her at the reapning that she was a good person. And in that arena? I didn't kill her. I wasn't even there when she died."

"No you weren't were you Mockingjay? You were busy running off into the jungle with Finnick, Mags, and Lover Boy. Too busy to notice the spear she dove in front of to keep it from killing Peeta."

This stops Katniss short. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. She died protecting yours and his ass. Now my kids have no mother, and your kids. The kids. For Katniss, every dealing with John, since finding out he was married to Cecelia comes back to those kids. She tries to remember this when he gets in her space, gets disgusting. She hates him. Until she remembers those kids. Then she's confused all over again. Because how could a father of three be as disgusting as John is?

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"You heard me. She died protecting yours and his ass. Now my kids have no mother, and your kids. The kids. For Katniss, every dealing with John, since finding out he was married to Cecelia comes back to those kids. She tries to remember this when he gets in her space, gets disgusting. She hates him. Until she remembers those kids. Then she's confused all over again. Because how could a father of three be as disgusting as John is?

"Hey Mockingjay, how about I visit you tonight?" John says the next day, as they're walking out of the big house on their way to do their chores.

"Fuck. You." She simply replies. But as she thinks about it more, she decides to engage him further. Stepping, she turns to him, "You know, John, I don't know what your problem with me is. I really don't. But I didn't kill her.

He narrows his eyes while his face darkens at this statement by Katniss. "Who do you think you are?" he practically spits at her. "How dare you talk to me about her?" It seems Katniss has touched on something.

"I didn't know her well John, but that doesn't mean I didn't like her." She tells him calmly. "You know what she did in training? She helped out Woof. She wouldn't let him eat the poisonous bugs. And I could tell from watching your kids hold on to her at the reapning that she was a good person. And in that arena? I didn't kill her. I wasn't even there when she died."

"No you weren't were you Mockingjay? You were busy running off into the jungle with Finnick, Mags, and Lover Boy. Too busy to notice the spear she dove in front of to keep it from killing Peeta."

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half embarrassed, half saddened. "And even that was in front of the entire country.

... still have only kissed two boys. The closest I got to anything more was when Peeta and I were... and I'd never even thought about boys like that before. I'll be 23 when I finally get out of here. I'll...

"Peeta was my first kiss, ever. In the cave, on camera." Katniss shares. "The first time I ever..." LoRay asks into the darkness. It seems these late night confessionals are becoming a routine. "You ever have sex Katniss?"... "Sorry. You're right. It's none of my business." Katniss responds and rolls over, attempting to ignore LoRay and go to sleep.

"Sorry about that." Katniss answers flatly, not really knowing what else to say. After all of this time, it's not as if she wants to share a bunk house with someone else either.

"Yeah. Whatever. They leave it like that for the night. Both getting ready in silence, politely looking away while the other uses the toilet that is still out in the open. They maintain a tense silence in the bunkhouse for a few days, and it spills over into their daily interactions. It's obvious neither one of them is really happy about the situation, but nothing can be done about it. What little ground they had made together seems to have been lost.

As days go by, the two girls become resigned to the fact that they must live together in such cramped quarters, even if they are still somewhat unhappy. But the conversation between them begins to pick up in the evenings as they are laying in their beds, trying to sleep.

"Were you a virgin before you slept with those peacekeepers LoRay?" Ever since Katniss found out what LoRay had to do for the rebellion, she's been curious about the whole story.

"That's none of your business Mockingjay." LoRay tersely responds. Katniss knows she is still kind of angry about this whole situation, being forced to bunk with Katniss, and having the rest of the crew suspicious of her.

"Sorry. You're right. It's none of my business." Katniss responds and rolls over, attempting to ignore LoRay and go to sleep.

"And it'd be nice if you could not scream in your sleep tonight too, Mockingjay. A whole night's sleep would be fantastic." LoRay adds a touch sarcastically.

They both wake the next day, not refreshed, but at least happy to get out of the cramped living space they've been forced into. Maggie passes out work assignments at breakfast, and as expected, Katniss is mucking out stalls and weeding the garden today. LoRay is out in the fields with the rest of the hands until noon, then she's in the garden with Katniss. The weeding goes on, although their work day conversations seem to have dwindled.

"I was a virgin." LoRay says into the darkness a few nights later. It seems as if she has something more she wants to say though, so Katniss doesn't interrupt. "I'd never had sex before. Never even had a real boyfriend. I mean, I'd kissed a few boys, but that's about it. The first peacekeeper was nice enough, but it still hurt like hell. I was so tense and afraid. After that it got easier. Easier to distance myself from the act in my mind. Couldn't be too attached anyway, then I'd miss out on information," she adds, almost like a confession of sorts.

"Sorry." Katniss has no other way to respond than that. "I'm really sorry."

"Why? You didn't do it." LoRay tersely responds. "I've never understood why people tell me they're sorry about this. I did it. I knew what I was doing. It's over and done."

"But where does that leave you now?" Katniss wonders out loud.

"What do you mean, where? In this shit hole, just like you Mockingjay." LoRay answers bluntly.

"You know what I mean LoRay."

"Yeah. I do. And I don't know. I don't know if I care enough to know where it leaves me. I just want to go to sleep."

After this, the tension between the two girls finally seems to lesson. But the whole situation has caused both girls to be a little more guarded with each other. They will never truly be friends, that much is certain.

"You ever have sex Katniss?" LoRay asks into the darkness. It seems these late night confessionals are becoming a routine.

"No." Katniss answers plainly.

"No? You mean, not only was Peeta lying about the baby, and the marriage, but you two didn't even do it? Even after your first games?"

"No LoRay, we never did it... Believe it or not, we were kind of too preoccupied at the time to do it."

"Sorry to offend Mockingjay."

"Yeah, well, I don't accept it." And she rolls over, facing the wall, ending the conversation for the night.

It's not too long before Katniss fills LoRay in on parts of her relationship with Peeta though. "Peeta was my first kiss, ever. In the cave, on camera." Katniss shares. "The first time I ever kissed a boy was on national television, in a fight to the death. How pathetic is that? 16 years old and I'd never even thought about boys like that before. I'll be 23 when I finally get out of here. I'll still have only kissed two boys. The closest I got to anything more was when Peeta and I were kissing on the beach in our underthings." Katniss smiles sadly and puts her hands over her face, half embarrassed, half saddened. "And even that was in front of the entire country."
"That is kind of pathetic," LoRay jokes trying to lighten the mood, though Katniss’ expression seems to imply she doesn't think it's very funny. "Oh come on, Mockingjay. There was a lot going on. You've said it before, you were too busy taking care of your sister before your Games. After? Well, then you had a rebellion to inspire" LoRay says cheekily. They both chuckle at that and settle in for the night.

"Was it all for the camera's?" LoRay asks the next night. "Was any of it real?" One thing about these conversations that they both know - no one else will overhear them. Perhaps that's why they wait until bed to ask these questions.

"Some? Parts? All? None? I don't know, LoRay. I don't really know."

"You know what?" LoRay sits up and looks directly at Katniss. "You'll be out of here soon, and then you'll have your whole life ahead of you. You'll have time to figure out what's real and what isn't." she says reassuringly before laying back down and settling in. "Oh, and Katniss?" she turns to her. "When it finally is real? When you finally do get to the point where you're ready to have sex? Make sure he's worth it." And with that LoRay rolls over and falls asleep.

"So, how are things working out with LoRay in your cabin?" Maggie asks Katniss one day after breakfast. She had asked her to wait after the others left, it was time for another one on one. Katniss dreaded these. She dreaded the idea of telling Maggie anything, let alone her thoughts. She also hated to admit that she felt better after talking to Maggie.

"Fine. I guess. At least as they can be, Maggie."

"Good. Good. I know it was a bit of a change, especially after being on your own for so long, but it had to be done. It would have been intolerable for her in the other cabin." Maggie explains.

"After all, I have all of you to look out for."

"Why did you put her with me though? For chores?" Katniss asks, curiously.

"Because I thought it was a good change for the both of you. She needed to see that you weren't who others said you were - good or bad. And you needed to learn that everyone has a story. Everyone had to make sacrifices during the war."

Katniss thinks on this, and she decides Maggie is probably right. If she had spent all 5 years here, alone except for her thoughts, she would think that District 12 was the only district to suffer. That she was the only one who had to sacrifice. Hearing LoRay's story made Katniss realize that there are plenty of people who sacrificed so much for Panem.

Time goes on, and soon, one by one, the prisoners begin to leave the ranch. They leave in relation to when they came. First in, first out. It all depends on their trials and convictions, Katniss assumes. Soon, there are just a handful left; Katniss, LoRay, John, and a couple of the others. She was the last one to come to the ranch, so she knows she'll be the last one to leave. Her days are still monitored, though, and she still has her chores to complete.

John is the next to leave. Katniss knows she has been waiting for this day since the first of the prisoners were released, counting the days really. John and Katniss have been keeping a wide berth of each other in these final days, but as John heads out on his way to the gate, guards in front of him, he stops in front of Katniss as she weeds the garden.

"It was Brutus," John says, looking down at the ground.

"What?" Katniss asks, looking up, not quite sure what he means.

"It was Brutus who killed Cecelia," he goes on to say. "She saw him lining up to throw his spear at Peeta as you were all running into the jungle. Cecelia jumped in front of it at the last minute. By the time Brutus got his spear back, you guys were already too far away."

Katniss takes a few moments to think over this information. She wonders what on earth she could say to John after this. Finally, she nods once in recognition and merely says, "She was a good person, John."

"She was the best." He nods, eyes still looking down.

This emboldens Katniss a bit, she straightens up and looks directly at John. "Peeta killed Brutus later, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know that," he says dejectedly and starts to walk away. He gets a few steps before he stops and says, "Hey Katniss?"

"Yeah John?" She sighs, wondering what kind of insult he's about to throw her way.

"Tell Haymitch I said Hey." With that final goodbye, and a nod of his head, he walks out of the room, out of the ranch, on his way to be reunited with his children for the first time in over 5 years. Katniss notices his gait is a little lighter, his head is a little higher. She won't miss John, not at all. But she will tell Haymitch about him. Someday.

"Maggie," Katniss says the day. It's after her shift in the kitchen. Those who are left at the ranch are out of the big house, and Maggie is in her office doing some kind of work. "Now that everyone is leaving, what's going to happen to the ranch?"

Maggie stops her work and looks up at Katniss. "Well, I've been able to hire some people from the district to work here. Once you all leave, they'll be able to start. Luckily it's an in-between time, and we'll be able to work with a skeleton staff until we can fully transition from a prison ranch to a private one."

"Do you have to wait until we're all gone before you can do that?"

"Yes, I do. People in the district know that there are political prisoners here, but they don't know who. I'll wait until you're all gone, that way no one can harass you, or the others. Believe it or not, Katniss, this country wants what's best for all of you. Many have argued that by cutting you off from your loved ones, we've done you an injustice. I may or may not agree. But keeping you here, keeping you safe? That was all done so that when the time is up, you can go home safely. It was the only solution everyone on the tribunal panels could agree on."

Katniss stays quiet, thoughtful about this. She's not convinced what they did to her was right, but she can't argue that she wasn't kept safe. She's been fed - isolated, perhaps overworked. She's been bothered, but no one has allowed any physical harm to come to her. There were days she was so desperate to hear about home, hear about Peeta, that she begged Maggie for just morsels of information. Now that her time is almost up, she may resent the government, may resent the revolution. But she can't resent Maggie.

Katniss heads back to the cabin to get ready for bed. As she settles in for the night she notices LoRay has wandered in.

"How much longer are you here for, LoRay? I mean, I know I was the last to arrive, but I'm not
"I guess I’ll complete my sentence fairly soon. John got here just a week before I did, so if we go by that, next week. LoRay answers a bit bewildered. "Crazy how it seems like it took forever to get here, but still no time at all."

"Tell me about it. I’ve got one more month, I think. What will you do when you’re done? Will you go back to 5?"

"Pff. Not likely." She shakes her head. "There’s nothing left for me back there. My family is dead. What friends I had turned their backs on me. I can’t go back there. I won’t go back.” LoRay pauses, looks out the doorway on to the yard. "Actually Maggie offered me a spot here that I’m pretty sure I’m going to take. She tells me no one in 10 would know me. A fresh start is what she says. I think I’ll need that,” she finishes, nodding.

This gets Katniss thinking.

"Maggie. Maybe I can stay here when my sentence is up?” Katniss asks the next morning, after everyone has left to do their daily chores.

"Now why would you want to go and do a thing like that girl?" Maggie looks up from clearing the table, smiling and shaking her head at her.

"I don’t know. I just thought, I’m pretty good with the horses, and chickens, and the garden and stuff. I can do all of that..." It’s not that Katniss really wants to stay on in 10, with Maggie and LoRay. Not really. It’s just that she knows what to expect here. 12? That’s a place she doesn’t have a clue about anymore.

"No Katniss. You can’t stay here." Maggie says definitively, if not kindly.

"But why not? LoRay told me she is. She said there’s nothing left for her in 5. I’m pretty sure there’s nothing left in 12, let alone anything left for me."

"Girl, you don’t know what you’re talking about.” Maggie chuckles. “Plus, LoRay’s story is hers. And maybe her story ends up here. But your story? That’s all your own, Mockingjay. And when it’s time for you to leave here, you’ll be a bird let out of the cage. Ready to fly. You might not think you are ready, but you are."

It’s about a month later. May the 8th, that Katniss gets her release news. "Happy birthday Mockingjay!" Maggie tells her. "I’ve got probably the best present you can think of!"

"What is it?" Katniss asks curiously. It’s just LoRay and Katniss left at the ranch. The guards are pitching in to make up for the other prisoners who have been released. Technically LoRay is no longer a prisoner, just Katniss. And since she’s not any trouble, the guards have been able to relax their control.

Maggie hands her an envelope, telling her to take it back to her bunk house to read. Katniss rushes out of the house and to her bunk house. Sitting down on her bunk she opens the letter.

Dear Ms. Everdeen,

You have now completed the court ordered incarceration portion of your sentence. You are now being returned to District 12, under the direct supervision of a parole officer. The terms of your release are binding and non-negotiable:

-You will live in District 12 for the rest of your days.
-You may not leave the District without special permission from the ruling bodies of both District 12 and the Capitol.
-You are not allowed to work within the District for at least 1 year, although you are allowed to keep your earnings as a Victor.
-You are not allowed any weapons, therefore you are not allowed to hunt.
-While you will be allowed access to the forest surrounding the District, you must report to your parole officer whenever you leave the District.
-The parole officer must know your whereabouts at all times.
-Any violation of these terms and you will be sent back to the Capitol permanently.

Katniss sits there in shock. It’s not like she didn’t know this day was coming, but now that it’s here, she can hardly believe it. She’s free, or she will be as soon as she leaves this place. She’s free, but what does that mean? It means she has to go back to 12. It’s part of the terms of her release.

Katniss now realizes that Maggie has known this all along. It’s why she wouldn’t allow her to stay at the ranch once she was released. But to go back to 12? She’s not sure she can.

"Pfft. Not likely.” She shakes her head. "There’s nothing left for me back there. My family is dead. What friends I had turned their backs on me. I can’t go back there. I won’t go back.” LoRay answers a bit bewildered. "Crazy how it seems like it took forever to get here, but still no time at all."

"But what if they don’t want me? What if I have nowhere to go home to?" Katniss allows herself this one time to show her fear. Fear of an unknown future waiting just outside of her grasp.

"Well, I heard there’s lots of woods that surround that district. Maybe you could cut down some trees and build yourself a nice little spot on the edge of the district,” and Maggie laughs at her own joke.

"Very funny Maggie. But, I mean, I had a house, but what if it’s not there now? What if someone else has moved in?"

"Now why would they do that? There’s a lot going on in 12 right now. You might not believe it, but it’s a bustling little district. I’ve heard the bakery is second to none in all of Panem.” Maggie winks at her.
The bakery. Peeta? Oh Peeta. How will she face him now, after all of these years? If he's smart, he'll have moved on, started a family or something. Found the peace that he so deserves. But, then again, what if he has moved on? What will I do then?

Maggie interrupts Kammis thoughts, "Your train leaves early, a couple of hours before the dawn. By this time tomorrow you'll be in your own district, away from here. I suggest you get back to your bunkhouse and start packing up. Because you are on that train tomorrow morning, ready or not. Now get going!" And she shoos Kammis out of the house and back to her quarters.

After packing up most of her things, Kammis wanders out to the barns to say goodbye to the animals. The hens, her first assignment at the ranch, who have been her constant companion, wait for her. They don't understand that she's leaving, but she gives them a final rub down anyway. She remembers how she used to tell them about her loved ones. She tells them her stories one more time, happy to hear them herself.

She goes into the hen house to clean out the straw. The eggs have been gathered for the day, so she makes sure the water is clean. She thinks about the songs she used to sing to them as she gathered the eggs and clean out the house each day. She likes to think her voice is still echoing through the walls even now. Like she's leaving a piece of her song here, for them. Because what are chickens, but just another version of a caged bird?

She walks the garden rows, picking a weed here and there. She thinks of the garden she could have back in 12, and her mouth turns into a small smile. Has she learned anything in these past five years? That she's learned to garden, take care of horses and chickens. And she's learned to keep herself just as guarded as she needs to be. But she was always good at that anyway. Looking up, she notices the sky begins to darken, so she heads back to the big house for her final supper in 10.

"So, tomorrow's the big day!" LoRay says enthusiastically that evening after they've gone to bed.

"Yep. Tomorrow's the big day." Kammis says, attempting some bravado. She's trying hard to not let her emotions show. She doesn't want LoRay to think she's sad, and she definitely doesn't want her to know how apprehensive she is about heading back home. "What will you do? Stay here in the bunkhouse?"

"Actually, Maggie's offered me a room up at her place. Says she wants to tear down both of the bunkhouses and build something a little more serviceable for people who might be travelling to and from town to work here. I'll be nice to have my own bathroom and shower again. And to not have to pee with someone else in the room," she smiles back. "What are you going to do?"

"Go back to 12 and see if there's anything left for me, I suppose. They didn't really give me much of a choice though."

"Kammis, for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to be here for five years. I'm sorry you don't know what your future looks like. But, I'm also glad for you. You deserve to go home. You deserve to find out for yourself what your life is all about."

"Thanks LoRay," Kammis says sincerely.

"And maybe, someday! You'll come back here to 10 to visit us?" she adds almost hopefully.

"Ha! Fat chance of that!" Kammis says, half serious, half joking. After adding the final items to her satchel, she settles in for the night. She's afraid she won't be able to sleep, but sleep does eventually come.

Early the next morning, while it is still dark, Kammis picks up her bag and heads out. Her hair, once long and braided in her signature style, was cut just after she came to 10. In the five years since, it's grown to just below her shoulders, long enough to braid again. But that is something Kammis has avoided. She needs no reminders of the girl she once was, of the sister she once had, and lost. So she leaves her hair down.

She heads up to the big house for a quick breakfast of fruit, biscuits, and coffee. Maggie takes one final look at Kammis and thinks that with her hair down it might be enough to keep curious onlookers away, after all. They'll be traveling back to 12 on the train. She'll have her own car, but there are always the attendants, not to mention those who might wander in by mistake. The main guard who was in charge of her has been assigned the job of seeing her safely back to 12, a second one was also chosen to go along. Though they have handguns, they are hidden under their shirts. No one wants to call attention to the most famous political prisoner in Panem. Especially now that she's being released.

"One final thing Kammis," Maggie says before Kammis leaves. "Give me your arm."

"What? Why?" Kammis asks curiously.

"Time to take out that last tracker," and Maggie gets out the instrument to safely remove the hidden tracking apparatus in her arm. "There you go girl! You can fly away now!"

With a grateful smile and a final wave to LoRay and Maggie, Kammis, flanked by both guards, begins to walk down the drive. There is a car waiting for them at the gate. The two guards climb in the front, one drives while the other sits in the passenger seat. Kammis climbs in the back, and turns to look out the window, absentmindedly mopping the spot on her arm where the tracker was. It's still pitch black out, but she has nothing to say to the guards.

It doesn't take too long to get to the train station. She remembers how she came to 10, in a hovercraft that landed in the middle of nowhere. Now she's leaving in a train. Thoughts of her Victory Tour enter her mind, and lost. So she leaves her hair down.

She walks the garden rows, picking a weed here and there. She thinks of the garden she could have back in 12, and her mouth turns into a small smile. Has she learned anything in these past five years? That she's learned to garden, take care of horses and chickens. And she's learned to keep herself just as guarded as she needs to be. But she was always good at that anyway. Looking up, she notices the sky begins to darken, so she heads back to the big house for her final supper in 10.

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"Thanks LoRay," Kammis says sincerely.

"And maybe, someday! You'll come back here to 10 to visit us?" she adds almost hopefully.

"Ha! Fat chance of that!" Kammis says, half serious, half joking. After adding the final items to her satchel, she settles in for the night. She's afraid she won't be able to sleep, but sleep does eventually come.

The train pulls out of the station not five minutes after they settle. The car has three compartments. A sleeping berth, a sitting room, and a washroom. The trip to 12 is short as this is one of the high speed trains left over from the old regime. It's not as ornate as the Tributes car, but it's nice enough. Kammis settles into the sleeping berth that's furnished with a bed and a sitting area. The guards tell her to leave the door open, but after that, they stay in the sitting area. Kammis spends the rest of the pre-dawn staring out the window.

The sun rises as they make their way to 12. About an hour before the train arrives, an attendant comes in with some bread and hot chocolate. She quietly goes about setting things up, glancing
back and forth at Katniss, but Katniss refuses to make eye-contact. She refuses to talk to anyone. Once the attendant leaves, Katniss eats the bread and drinks the hot chocolate, steeling herself for her arrival.

It isn’t long and the train begins to slow its fast pace. Soon, Katniss can see the mountains and the valleys of home. A strange feeling of nostalgia mixed with panic begins to set in. Once again she asks herself what she will do. No one has really told her much. Just that she’s going back to 12. She’s left to assume her house is still there, still hers. She feels her heart race and her palms sweat. She hears the guards in the other room start to stir, so she picks up her satchel and walks into the room.

“Almost there!” the second guard says, trying to be enthusiastic. Katniss looks him in the eye and nods once. That is the only communication she will allow. Soon, the train stops and the doors open. She can see the morning sun shine through the open door. She can hear the people moving around outside. She can smell that smell that is distinctively District 12, and she takes a deep breath for fortification.

“There you go Miss! You’re on your own now. Good luck!” says the guard.

“Ms. Everdeen,” the first guard begins quickly as Katniss makes the first step towards the door, leaving permanent custody forever. “I just want you to know… I feel fortunate to have… guarded you… Good luck Miss Everdeen.”

Katniss is a bit unnerved by this. This is the same guard that held a gun pointed at her for 5 years. This is the same guard that gave her no sympathy, no help, nothing. And now, as he fumbles over his words, Katniss turns. “Thank you,” is all she says.

Katniss steps off of the train, satchel in hand, and takes a deep breath. After 5 years in District 10, she is finally home...
Epilogue: Janie's Story

People are always asking her what it was like being raised by Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, which she thinks is so interesting. "I don't know? What was it like being raised by your parents?" she often replies. To Janie, Katniss and Peeta are just that. Katniss and Peeta. They are the two people in this world she knows she can count on forever.

She still has memories of when she first met this "Mockingjay" and how disappointed she was that this bird didn’t have any wings. It took her some time to reconcile herself to the fact that not all mockingjays have wings. However, as she grew older she realized that sometimes mockingjays do grow them. And that is exactly what Katniss, and Janie, grew over the years - wings…

"Hey Janie!" Peeta says to the seven year old girl. They are at the bakery, in the kitchen, and Peeta is showing Janie how to make flowers on the cookies that have cooled. "Um. I was wondering… what would you think about me living with you and Katniss all of the time?"

"But you already do," the young girl giggles.

"Well, I mostly do, that’s true," he smiles back, "But I’m thinking about asking Katniss to have a toasting. Would you be alright with that?" Peeta asks the girl, because he knows how important it is that Janie feel safe, and that Katniss know that he is dedicated to both of them.

"Really?" the girl squeals. She doesn’t really know what this ‘toasting’ thing is, other than it means they will be married, and she thinks that is a good thing. Especially if it means she gets to have both Katniss and Peeta all of the time. Ever since Peeta has been spending most of his spare time at their house, she hasn’t heard Katniss scream in the middle of the night as much. Not like she used to. And Katniss’ bad days aren’t nearly as bad as they were before. "Oh Peeta! You’d always live with us? Forever?" she says as she throws her arms around his waist.

"Yes, Janie," he laughs, attempting to stay upright. "Always."

"But what about your house? Who will live there?"

"Well, I heard Sae and her granddaughter might be looking for a new place to live. I thought I’d offer it to her."

"Oh I like that! Sae makes the best soups! And it’s fun to play with her granddaughter too!"

When they leave the bakery later that evening, Peeta has a loaf of a hearty bread tucked under his arm, and a small box marked with the distinctive Mellarks Bakery logo. "What's in the cute little box Peeta? she asks innocently, trying not to appear too curious.
"Just a little something for one of my favorite girls," he says with a wink.

Janie doesn’t remember much about the toasting. It was only Katniss, Peeta, and Janie in front of the fire, and Katniss was happy. Haymitch came for supper, but left soon after that. She remembers the crackle of the fire, the smell of the bread toasting. Janie thought Katniss was the happiest she’d ever been. And Peeta made Janie a special cupcake, a chocolate one with white icing and violets on top, so of course she remembers that!

"And this is for you!" Peeta tells her after it is all over. He hands her the small box he carried home from the bakery earlier.

"For me? The box is for me?" She says excitedly. "Thank you Peeta!" and she peers inside to see the intricate designs he has drawn on this special cupcake, made just for her.

"You deserve something special too," he tells her with a smile.

Janie looks to Katniss to see if it’s alright for her to eat it, and she sees that Katniss has a smile on her face and a glow in her eye. "Go ahead! Eat it. Peeta made it just for you!"

Life went on fairly normally for the family. Holidays spent with Haymitch, Sae, and her granddaughter. They still had their monthly dinners with friends, though that circle has grown and changed over the years. Thom and Delly married and soon had a son of their own. Leevy met a young girl, Mari, who was new to 12. They now run another Home in the District. Haymitch’s geese continue to prosper, much to the chagrin of Katniss, and the enthusiasm of Janie. But nothing compares to the day Rhea’s long lost boyfriend turned up in the district unannounced.

"Excuse me," a man about Peeta’s age says as he and Janie make their way back from the train station after checking the daily mail. The man looks nervous, holding a hat in his weathered hands. He looks as if he’s been travelling a long time, with no place left to go. His brown hair is sun streaked, and his face looks reddened from the sun. But his brown eyes, while tense, are still soft, still show hope.

"Yes?" Peeta replies pleasantly. Most people in 12 are still wary of strangers, but Peeta tries to be pleasant, and tries to instil that in Janie. He usually jokes that he’s trying to counteract Katniss’ scowl.

"I’m looking for someone. Someone I knew a long time ago," the stranger says earnestly. “I was told she might be here now. Here in 12.”

"Oh Me! You’re lucky today. Because Peeta knows everyone here!" Janie tells the man excitedly. She likes this idea of a mystery. She’s ten now, and everything seems to be so dramatic.

"Well, that’s good then. " the stranger smiles down to Janie, even though the tension is still in his eyes. “Her name is Rhea. Last I’d heard she moved here to run the Group Home?”

"Rhea?" Janie squeals. “Oh! I know who you are! You’re Matt!” and she jumps up and down, clapping her hands.

At this, the man visibly relaxes. “You know her? She’s here?” He sounds as if he holding back years of tears.

"Yes, she is," Peeta says holding on to Janie before she can say much more. “Come to the bakery with me, we’ll give her a call.”

It’s been 10 years since the war. And by the time Matt was able to find his way back to 5, Rhea had disappeared. With the state of Panem’s infrastructure and communications, he’s been travelling from district to district, town to town searching for her. But when he sees her running up the stairs to the bakery, tears streaming down her face, when she jumps into his arms, burying her face in his neck, those years melt away. They remained that way, in the front of the bakery, afraid to let the other go for so long, Peeta had to finally tap them on the shoulder to remind them where they were.

Matz stayed in 12, married Rhea, and they continued to run the Group Home, even after they had their own children. By that time, the government decided to add another Home in the district and asked Leevy and her partner, Mari, to be in charge.

Visits from Johanna and phone calls from Annie occur on a regular basis throughout the years. Even Mrs. Everdeen would try to call once a week. Annie would often tell Katniss and Peeta that Janie was all Mrs. Everdeen ever spoke about. Katniss wasn’t sure what to think about her mother, and Janie overheard her talking to Peeta on more than one occasion about it. On the one hand, she always seemed so distant and disinterested, but on the other hand, Janie did enjoy the conversations. Annie would claim that Mrs. Everdeen told everyone how proud she was of Katniss and her recovery, and of her little family, though Mrs. Everdeen never seemed to tell the Mellarks this.
When Janie was twelve, Peeta decided it was time to visit some of the other districts, although Katniss took some convincing.

"Katniss, we’ve talked about this. She’s twelve. She’s of Reaping age. I think it’s time we went. It’s time we see the rest of the country."

"I don’t know Peeta. Why can’t we just stay here, thankful that there are no more reapings? Why can’t we just enjoy the fact that life is good again? At least here and for now?"

"Because, Katniss,” he says earnestly, holding her hands. “You still think it could all end at a moment’s notice. I want Janie to see this country, see what the world is like. And I want you to realize it’s better now. I want to visit our friends, I want to see for myself how everything has changed.”

"Fine,” she huffs. “But I’m not going to the Capitol. And we’re going to 10. If I “need” to see how Panem has changed, you need to see where I was.”

"I think that’s actually a great idea, Katniss. Janie and I will be there with you the whole way."

"But I’m still not going to the Capitol,” she holds her ground firmly.

“What about Effie?"

“She’s more than welcome to visit us here. She knows that. Or she can meet us at a spot along the way. But I refuse to step one foot in that city.”

“What if we just agree to leave that thought on hold?”

“Fine. But I won’t change my mind.”

In the end, that decision was made for the three of them. Thom received word of the places they would be allowed to travel “for the protection of Katniss Everdeen” it said. They were allowed to visit 7, 10, 2, and 4. In that order. No deviating from the schedule. A security team was assigned to them. They would be in the background, would not hinder their travelling. Again, “all for the protection of Katniss Everdeen.” Later on, Janie would come to believe it was because they didn’t want Katniss traveling wherever she chose. The new government would always have control over Katniss Everdeen.

Janie was beside herself listening to them talk. She’d been learning about the new Panem in school. Her friends had all made trips to 4 to the beaches, to the home districts of their parents, or even to the Capitol.

Ever since they started studying The Hunger Games in school, and learning about the war, Janie understood that Katniss has her fears. She knows how very real they are. She heard the screams in the middle of the night. She saw Peeta grabbing on to the backs of chairs as he waited for a flashback to pass. So when she found out they were going to spend the school break travelling around, she couldn’t believe her luck.

It took a few weeks, but finally Katniss consented. Peeta left the bakery in the capable hands of his staff, contacted Thom to arrange the proper travel and security arrangements. He arranged for Haymitch and Sae to keep watch over things at their house. Since there was nothing else Katniss could think of to delay them, she packed up their bags, and off they went for a month of travel.

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Their first stop was to 7. Katniss had decided that if they were going to go, they needed to visit a friendly face first, in a place where there wouldn’t be too much attention drawn to them.

As the train rounds the bend, and the District 7 train station comes into view, Janie strains to look out the window. There on the platform was a slight woman with a pixie haircut holding out a sign that said, “Over here Janie Bear!”

"Johanna!” Janie yells, as she runs down the steps. Katniss and Peeta take up the rear. Janie jumps into Johanna’s arms, giving her a tight bear hug. Johanna has visited the Mellarks in District 12 over the years, but this is the first time Janie has been outside of the District.

“How’s my little bear doing? I’m so glad to see you live and in person! It’s about time those caregivers of yours let you out of the district!”

“Very funny, Johanna,” Janie replies as Katniss and Peeta lean in for a hug.
“Come on you three, let’s get back to my place,” Johanna says as she leads them to her car.

“So, nice sign for Janie there,” Katniss says on the drive to the house.

“Well, since Mr. Tall, Dark, and in charge of Panem’s National Security threatened to have me locked up on my own prison ranch in 10 if I did anything to bring attention to either of you two, that just left me with Janie.”

“Gale said that?” Peeta asks curiously.

“Yes. He did. And I feel personally violated by him and his regulations.” Johanna replies, acting offended, but the smirk on her face gives her away. “Relax Brainless. I’m brash and I’m irreverent, but I’m not mean and I’m not stupid. I’d never do anything to give you two away, you know that.”

“Yes I do, Johanna. Thank you” Katniss replies, reaching out to grip her hand. “I’m so happy to see you Jo. I’m so glad to be here.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here too. And you’re just in time! We’re having our Lumberjack Games this weekend. Here’s where you’ll see some real action!”

“Lumberjack Games?” Peeta questions as the car turns into the drive.

“Yes, Lumberjack games. We throw axes, we cut down trees, we climb trees. It’s fun, you’ll see. Look! We’re here!” Once they pull into the drive and exit the car, they head into Johanna’s home. It’s a log cabin, situated in the woods. The property is surrounded by a locked gate with only one way in. Lot’s of privacy, so the agents have gotten themselves a room in town. They’ll enjoy some downtime as well.

“I don’t know about going to these games Jo,” Katniss says warily once they are inside.

“Oh please Katniss? I’ve read about these! I want to see them!” Janie begs her.

“How about this,” Peeta responds, touching Katniss’s hand. “Why don’t we let Jo take Janie to these games and we stay back at her place and relax? No one will bother Janie if she’s with Jo, we can relax, and Janie can have some fun?”

It was decided that the next day, Janie and Jo would head over to the wood lot, while Katniss and Peeta enjoyed some ‘alone time’.

“Thunk…. THunk… THunk!”

“Peeta,” Janie groans, rolling over and refusing to open her eyes. “Why is he up walking around at this hour?”

Then, as the rest of her senses awaken she realizes, 1) it’s not that early and 2) it isn’t Peeta walking around. She hears them outside from her bedroom window:

“Nice shot Brainless! If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve been practicing!”

“Well, all it takes is good aim. The hatchet does the rest.”

“Hey Janie! How are you this morning!” Peeta interrupts before Jo can say any more, while Katniss just glares at her. Janie has just stumbled out of bed and meets them in the yard.

“Fine Peeta. And you know I know how Jo won her Games, right? Remember, we’ve talked about all of this,” she says in a bored tone.

Jo has the decency to look a little abashed. “Still, I probably shouldn’t talk about it so much. Makes Katniss and Peeta a little touchy I suppose,” she winks at them while they roll their eyes at her. “Come on Mellarks, let’s go eat something so Janie and I can get on our way,” she says as she leads them into the house for some breakfast.
Janie loved the Lumberjack Games. She never knew people could climb trees so fast. Once they finally returned to 12, she spent the better part of the summer trying to climb trees in the woods like that, and begging Katniss to let her practice throwing a hatchet. Katniss gave in eventually. While Janie was always good with both the bow and the hatchet, she was secretly glad to not be as good as Katniss. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be like that. She was happier helping out at the bakery than she was hunting in the woods with Katniss.

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They arrive in 10 just as the morning rush is dispersing. It seems Peeta, with the help of Thom, has organized their arrivals and departures to be at times when they are least likely to draw suspicion.

Of all the places Janie has seen, 10 is the most mysterious. It's big and flat and dusty, but there is still life teeming all around. The people all dress in heavy denim, with funny big hats that must block out all of the sun. They certainly dress differently here than they do in 12.

Janie goes with Peeta to the window to ask about a ride to the Three Heifers Ranch. “Well, you’ve gotten in at just the right time,” the woman behind the counter says, eyeing Peeta suspiciously. “I see LoRay on her way now.”

“Ka-Ka-Hey!” Janie looks to see a woman about Katniss and Peeta’s age rushing up to Katniss. Peeta makes a sharp move to intercept, as does the security detail, but it’s soon evident that Katniss knows who this young woman is.

“LoRay?!”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to visit for a few days! Didn’t Maggie tell you?”

“Are you serious? No she didn’t! No wonder she sent me here today, she’s sneaky that one. She told me I had to go pick up a special order. I guess I know what that is now!”

“Well, since we’re here, do you think you could give us a lift?” Katniss jokingly asks.

“Oh! Sorry! Yes! Please, hop in!” And they hop into the backseat of what is obviously the ranch truck.

Janie notices Katniss’ change of attitude as soon as they turn up the drive. She seems to withdraw a bit, folding in on herself as she looks out the window to the landscape around her. Her breathing quickens and she seems to be taking large, calming breaths, just like Anya taught her to do back when she was still going to see her.

“It’s all so different, but yet I feel like I’ve never left” Katniss tells Peeta as he puts his hand over hers. Janie reaches over and holds on to her other hand. They are both determined to go through this at Katniss’ side. It isn’t long before the truck pulls up to a great white farm house. They climb out of the truck and Peeta and Janie follow LoRay and Katniss up the stairs.

“Katniss Everdeen as I live and breathe!” Maggie says as they go through the front door.

“Maggie! I don’t think you’ve changed at all,” Katniss says giving the older woman a hug. Even though she was her guard, she was still an important part of Katniss’ recovery. She has never forgotten this woman, probably the only one at the time who believed in her. “Tell me about the ranch? How are things?”

They stay up late into the night talking about the past. LoRay is happy to be a part of the conversation. Peeta and Janie sit and listen on, and find out what Katniss was like, what she went through before she returned to 12. Peeta never let go of her hand once all night.

“I never knew, Katniss,” he said to her as the three of them made their way up to bed. “You never told me.”

“What was there to say? I spent most of my time here in a depressed fog, isolating myself from everyone?”

“No wonder you were so scared when you came back.”

“I had no idea what I was going to do, Peeta. None. I didn’t know if anyone still cared about me. But, as time went on, I began to see how much you did for me, even when I couldn’t. I always think about that.”
“That’s what we do though, right? Take care of each other? Protect each other?”

“Yes!” Janie chimes in. “We’re Mellarks. That’s what we do!”

The next day Katniss leads them on a trip down memory lane. She tells them of the horses and the chickens she used to tend. She shows them where the garden was. LoRay jokes about their time picking weeds. The cabins are all gone, replaced by a state of the art outbuilding that the hired hands use when they have to stay over due to the needs of the ranch.

The stay in 10 was good for all three of them. Katniss was glad to reconnect with LoRay and Maggie, and Peeta was impressed by LoRay and her story. When she found out how old Janie was, LoRay thought it would be important for her to have another view of the war, one not found in the history books. Katniss was there to make sure it was kept as tame as could be, and LoRay respected Katniss’ need for Janie to remain somewhat sheltered. But Janie was glad to have another perspective about the war, and Peeta thought it was good for her to learn how other districts fought the war.

On the last morning, before they left LoRay took Janie out to the hen house to gather eggs.

“Katniss looks different since she was here,” LoRay tells Janie

“Really?” Janie is learning a side about Katniss that she always knew existed, but it is certainly not the Katniss she knows.

“Yeah. When she was here, she was so quiet. She stayed away from everyone for so long. The only reason I got to know her is because Maggie made us work together.” the young woman confesses.

“I’ll bet that was fun! I mean, I love Katniss. But I know what she can be like!” At that, they both share a laugh.

“Seriously though, you and Peeta? You’re good for her,” LoRay continues. “She’s so different now. She always seemed to have the weight of the world on her shoulders. She was always worried about Peeta, about Panem, about what she would do when she left here. She was mourning her sister, and probably everyone else she had lost. None of that ever left her in the five years she was here. It’s good to see her happy and smiling. I never ever saw her smiling when I knew her.”

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The trip to District 2 was very different from the others. The security was ramped up, and no one was allowed to go outside on their own. Everywhere they went, a security detail walked with them, and some followed them.

“Wow, for the war being over 12 years, it seems like some people might not have gotten that message,” Peeta says, looking around as they exit the train. The military presence is strong in 2. Janie isn’t sure if it is because there is still a threat of uprising in 2 or if it is because 2 is the base of all Military in Panem. Either way, it is disconcerting for the three Mellarks.

“Over here, ma’am,” the guard says to Katniss, and the others follow. They are led up to a large house surrounded by an iron gate. The guard punches a code into his wrist cuff, and the doors automatically swing open. The gates shut as soon as the last person is through. “Straight ahead, ma’am. You see the house there? That’s where you’re going.” the guard tells her bluntly.

Janie doesn’t know why the guard insists on only talking to Katniss. She is a bit annoyed, and can see frustration on Peeta’s face, and exasperation on Katniss’. “You know there are three of us here, right?” Katniss says sarcastically.

The guard merely nods his head in the direction of the house. “I’m starting to feel like I’m under arrest again,” Katniss says to Peeta and Janie. At that, they both reach over and grab one of her hands.

As soon as they approach the house, the door opens and out walks Cressida and Gale. “Katniss! Peeta! Welcome!” Cressida says, clearly happy to have them there. Gale stands back a bit, Janie can see the discomfort on his face. “Is that little Janie?” Cressida says. “Come here and let me look at you! The last time I saw you, you were just a little baby. My how you’ve grown! What a beautiful young woman you are!” Cressida is clearly the most excited one of the bunch.

“It’s good to see you too Cressida,” Peeta says, leaning in for a hug. “Would it be alright if we head inside? I think the guards are making us all a little jumpy.”

“Oh my! Of course, come in! We’re so used to the guards, we forget other people might not be.” Cressida explains. “Tonight Hazelle and the kids will be by, but let’s get you settled in first!”
Throughout all of this conversation, Janie notices both Gale and Katniss watching each other. She thinks it almost looks as if they’re sizing each other up for a confrontation.

"Katniss, it’s good to see you," Gale finally says, subdued.

"You too Gale. You’re looking well. You look all official. Nice uniform"

"Comes with the job, you know."

"Oh, I suppose so," said Katniss.

"Peeta," Gale says, reaching for a handshake that Peeta returns. Janie notices a level of discomfort between Gale, Peeta, and Katniss, that she hasn’t ever felt before. "Janie, look at you, all grown up! It’s almost as if Gale just doesn’t have the words he needs to speak to them."

Cressida stands back, allowing the three to have their time. "Well, there should be some fun tonight." Cress finally says to break the tension. "Like I said, Hazelle and the kids will be over. Posey is getting married soon, so you’ll get to meet her fiancé."

"Posey is getting married?" This takes Katniss by surprise. "The last time I saw her she was just a young thing! I can’t believe she’s old enough to get married."

"Time flies when you’re having fun, Catnip," Gale says without thinking. Janie can see the dark look on Katniss’ face at this.

"Well," Katniss replies stiffly. "I suppose we both have a different interpretation of that word, ‘fun.’ and she stomps into the house ahead of the rest of the group.

The trip to 2 wasn’t all tense though. Gale suggested they take a tour of the Nut, as it had been refurbished, but Katniss politely declined. Some of the people who put Katniss up during the offensive in 2 stopped by Gale and Cressida’s to check on Katniss. It was good for her to see them, to know that their lives had gotten better. The group was able to go out to the market and various places. It was good for them to see how life in 2 was recovering after the war.

While at the market, Gale noticed a strange older man was following them around. He quietly mentioned to Cressida to get everyone back to the house, while he stayed to deal with the stranger. Later, after he returned, Gale was reluctant to talk about the matter, so everyone just let it drop.

It was while they were in 2 that Gale and Katniss were able to speak to each other for the first time since the war. Katniss didn’t share too much with Janie and Peeta, just that it was good to speak to Gale, but that she was glad to be leaving soon. It was very evident to Janie that, while Katniss and Gale were good friends at one point, they would never have the close friendship they used to share. In a way this made Janie sad, to think that friends could come and go in her life, but she understood. It was very clear that Gale and Katniss were at two very different points, and had two very different opinions on how to handle most things.

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Once their stay in 2 was over, they headed to 4. Janie was excited, she hoped to see the beach, and spend time swimming in the ocean. She wondered if it was different than swimming in the lake at home. She was going to see Katniss’ mother for the first time. She had spoken to her on the phone often, it would be nice to see her in person. Janie was also excited because, for the first time on this trip, she would have a chance to be with someone her own age. Annie’s son would be there. Finally, Janie would have someone to talk to.

"Why does that bother me, Peeta? Why does my mother living near Annie bother me?" Katniss says out loud.

"Because she should be living near you, maybe?" Peeta replies. Janie keeps quiet. She has always had nice conversations with Katniss’ mother, but she also knows there is a cavern of distance between the mother and her daughter, and she knows that Peeta is just as annoyed by her mother’s actions as Katniss is.

The guards have secured a cab to take the family to their destination.

"She should know we’re coming," Katniss complains. "I wrote her, and Janie spoke to her of this
several times. Why couldn’t she at least meet us at the station?”

“I don’t know Katniss. Your mother is as much of a mystery to me as she is to you.” Peeta says, sounding annoyed as well.

“I think she might be a little nervous,” Janie volunteers. “She said she wasn’t sure what to do, how to act when we finally met face to face. Maybe she’s scared?”


It isn’t long before the car is turning into the drive that leads to Victor’s Village. Janie notices that the hospital is quite near the Village. “Oh, that makes sense. She lives near the hospital.”

As the car pulls up to the house and slows down, the family just stares at the enormity of not only this house, but all of them. “I guess District 4 Victor’s got a bit more than we did in 12?” Peeta comments.

“I learned, in school, that the wealthier districts had larger Victor’s Homes. They needed to stand out from the others,” Janie says.

“Makes sense, but it still stings a bit,” Peeta replies back, with a wry smile. “We were lucky, even in our Village, when the electricity worked all of the time, and they were living like this?”

“Not now Peeta,” Katniss touches him, and he nods, takes a breath, and opens the door.

As they walk up to the house they hear voices coming from the open windows.

“What time did you say they’d be here?” a man says.

“I think they were arriving on the afternoon train,” a woman replies. Janie knows that voice. It’s Katniss’ mother, so they know they are at least at the right house. But who is that man?

“So, do you want me here when they come? Or do you want to wait and break that news later?” he asks sounding annoyed.

“Oh honey, you know it’s not that I’m ashamed. It’s just, you don’t know Katniss. She was her father’s girl…” her voice peter’s off.

“Yeah, I know. And I may not know her personally, but I saw enough of her from her games and the war to know I need to tread lightly,” he says, a bit more complacent. And Janie hears a sound that is suspiciously like what she hears from Katniss and Peeta when they think she’s not around. She turns to look at Katniss and sees her face has gone pale.

“Katniss?” Peeta says quietly. “Did you know?”

“Know? Why would I know anything about her life. She’s never told me anything. Only that she was always busy,” she replies, sounding dangerously as if she’s about to cry.

“Well, the cab is gone, and so are the guards, so we may as well knock,” he suggests. “Janie, perhaps you should do it?” and he holds on to Katniss’ hand as if she’s about to make a run for it.

Janie reaches out and knocks on the door. “Oh! No! They’re here!” the family hears from the open window.

It was an awkward meeting. Mrs. Everdeen spent most of it trying to go between Katniss, Janie, and her “friend”. She was happy to tell her family about Gerard. He was a specialist at the hospital. Apparently he was also there at the hospital from its beginning, and the more they worked together, the closer they became. It wasn’t until they had been seeing each other for a few months that Mrs. Everdeen told him who she was, and who her daughter was. Gerard took that in stride, and said he was proud to be associated with a woman who raised such a strong daughter.

From Janie’s perspective, Gerard seemed to be good for Lily Everdeen. She told them how he helped her heal from the loss of her youngest daughter. That it was Gerard who encouraged her to contact Katniss, get to know Janie more. It was Gerard who helped Lily accept the past for what it was, and move on.

In turn, the Mellarks had no real problem with Gerard. Not really. He was nice enough, and he did
In turn, the Mellarks had no real problem with Gerard. Not really. He was nice enough, and he did seem good for Lily. As much as Katniss didn’t want to admit it, he was quite a bit like her father. Same outgoing attitude, same optimistic look at life. However, Katniss still had a problem with her mother. That first night Janie overheard Katniss and her mother arguing after she had gone to bed.

“So Mother. How long? And when were you going to tell me?”

“Katniss, it isn’t that simple.”

“Actually, it is. It could have gone something like this, ‘Hello Katniss, it’s your mother. I’ve met someone…”

“And then what would you have done, Katniss?”

“I don’t know. But I do know that I deserved to hear it from you before I walked up and heard you two today. I know that I deserved to know something about your life! I’m your daughter. I’m the only living relative you have left!”

“Yes, Katniss. I know that. I’m sorry. But some things are just too painful…”

“You painful? Too painful? What about me? What about my pain? What about me being at a prison work ranch for five years not knowing what was going on outside? What about me being returned to 12, alone? With no family to help me? What about me, mother?”

“What about you, Katniss? When have you ever needed me? When have you ever shared anything with me? Why am I not allowed to move on and live my life?”

“I have always needed you, mother,” Katniss replies with a dead calm. Janie hears her walking up the stairs and closing the door to her room.

That night, Janie hears the sobs from Katniss and Peeta’s room. “Why weren’t we enough Peeta? Why aren’t I enough?”

“Hey, you are enough! You are.” He comforts her. “Don’t be too hard on her, Katniss. I know she’s hurt you. But imagine what she’s been going through, ever since your father died. I’m not saying you have to like it, but I’m saying just try to look at it from her perspective, ok? What’s important is that we move on, make it better. Make our lives, and Janie’s, better.”

The rest of their visit to 4 was tense, as Katniss and her mother tried to come to a common understanding. Janie was glad to get out of the house and go to the beach with Annie’s son as much as she could. They were the same age, and had many of the same interests. He would talk about his father, Finnick, and about his mother, and how they were Victor’s. It was nice for Janie to have someone who could understand a bit of what the life of the child of a Victor was like. The way people at school would stare at them when they learned of their parent’s games. The awkwardness of seeing their family member’s faces on television during memorial services. He was also able to tell her about Lily’s friend Gerard.

“He’s a good guy, Janie. He and Lily are really nice and always doing things for me and my mom.” he said one day as they were looking for sea glass on the beach.

“They’re nice, but why doesn’t she do those things for Katniss? Katniss is her daughter.”

“I think Katniss scares Lily. I can see it in her eyes sometimes when she talks about her. She doesn’t know what to say or do around Katniss, so she doesn’t do anything. At least with my mom, she’s able to give advice, or help out around the house, you know?”

“I guess I do,” Janie stops to stare out at the surf. “But it still isn’t right.”

“Oh, I know that.” he stops and looks at Janie. “But I can understand it at least.”

Katniss did try with her mother and Gerard. She was polite to Gerard, and he went out of his way to be kind to the family. He would take Janie out to the market, he’d help Peeta in the kitchen, getting tips on bread making, since Lily was hoping to have some of those famous Mellark baked goods. No one could fault him for wanting to know her and her family a little more. The visit to 4 was an eye opening one for Janie. She saw just how much the deprivations before the war, The Hunger Games, and the war itself could tear a family apart. She could see how those things could damage a family beyond repair.

After the confrontation with her mother, Katniss spent more time alone with Janie. Janie didn’t mind, it was nice to have just the two of them, sometimes. Janie loved Peeta beyond anything, but she occasionally missed time with just Katniss.

“You know Janie,” Katniss tells the girl as they sit on the sand, watching the tide roll in. “When I
was locked in my room in the Capitol, during my trial. I thought I was just like my mother. I wanted to shut down and lose myself to the rest of the world. But if this visit has taught me anything, it’s that I may have some things in common with my mother, but I am not like her. I will not shut down and leave my family. I will not move on from you. I feel sorry for her really. Instead of facing her fears, she hides away. I am not like that. And I hate you and Peeta to thank for that. I want you to know that whatever happens... whatever happens, you will be my girl. You will always be my Janie Bear. You know that, right?” she squeezes her hand.

The visit to 4 seemed cathartic for Katniss. She was different after that. She was more attentive to Janie and to Peeta. Almost as if she wanted them to know just how much she cared about them. She once told Janie that her visit to 4, and seeing her mother was like a cleansing for her soul. She was able to let go of all of the past, the anger and resentment she held. Katniss said she realized something about her mother. She was able to let go of some expectations. They still spoke, Lily still sent special gifts to Janie, but it was different. Her mother would always be her mother, but it was best that she was in 4 and Katniss was in 12.

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It wasn’t long after they returned to 12 that Katniss announced she was going to have a baby. At first Janie was hurt, afraid that Katniss and Peeta wouldn’t want her anymore. So she hid away in her room, avoiding them as much as possible. Katniss gave her a few days before she went to her.

“Janie, can I come in?” Katniss asks at her doorway.

Janie just shrugs her shoulders. “Do whatever you want.”

Katniss walks quietly, carefully into the room. “The mural you and Peeta created together still looks as fresh as the day you painted it. Do you still like it?”

“Yes.” She answers shortly, refusing to look at Katniss.

“How are things at school? New school year and all...?” Katniss tries to draw out a conversation with Janie, but Janie is making it very difficult.

“Fine,” she shrugs noncommittally.

Finally, Katniss touches Jamie’s shoulder, getting her attention. “Listen, Janie. I think I know what’s going on here.”

“What.” the girl sighs.

Katniss looks Janie in the eye, “It’s the baby...”

At this the young girl begins to wipe a tear that has begun to fall.

Seeing the girl’s sadness, Katniss pulls her into a hug. “Remember what I told you on the beach in 4? That you will always be my Janie Bear? I meant that.”

“But the baby will change everything,” she cries into Katniss’ shoulder.

“The baby will change things, yes, but the baby will only make our family better. And I’m going to need you for this.”

“You will?” the girl sniffles.

“Can I tell you a secret Janie? I’m scared. I don’t have a clue what I’m doing. I’m so afraid that when the baby finds out about my past, they won’t love me. Peeta says it will be ok. He tells me we have you, and the book.”

“Oh Katniss! You do have me!” the girl holds on to Katniss tighter.

“I’m going to need you to help me out here, ok? When it gets too hard, when I get scared, I’m going to need you to remind me that life is good. Can you do that?”

“Yes! I can!”

Katniss lets go of the hug, and looks at Janie, “And we have to protect the baby too. No one needs to know about our family. Well, no one outside of 12. We can’t let our baby be a piece in this country’s games. Not like Peeta and I were. Can you do that with us?”

“Of course!” she tells her earnestly.
“Can I tell you another secret?” Janie notices a smile and a slight change in Katniss’ demeanor.
“The doctor says the baby is a girl!”

“A girl? You’re having a girl!” she says, excitedly.

“No Janie, we’re having a girl. And who knows more about girls than you?”

It was in the middle of the night, about six months after this conversation, that Janie was woken up by Peeta carrying a new little bundle. “Hey Janie,” he whispered to her. “Wake up! I’ve got someone for you to meet.”

It didn’t take Janie long to figure out what Peeta was talking about, even if it was the middle of the night. She sat up and let Peeta put the new baby in her arms.

“You’re my little sister! I have a baby sister!” She said with awe. “Shh, don’t cry! I’m here. I’ll protect you because that’s what we Mellarks do. We protect each other.”

By the time Peeta and Katniss had their son, Janie was already a seasoned big sister. She took care of both children whenever Katniss would allow it. The bond between the three children was strong. The two younger children would follow Janie wherever she went.

Five years after their visit to 2, Janie received a letter from Gale. Apparently Janie’s maternal grandfather had come forward and he wanted to meet her.

“No Peeta. No. She’s not going.” Katniss says definitively.

“I don’t think she has much of a choice, Katniss. From the way Gale puts it, the man could press charges if he wanted to.”

“Katniss. It’s OK. I can go,” Janie tries to calm Katniss. “It’s only for two weeks. Gale says I can stay with him and Cress. He won’t let me out of his sight. I’ll be alright.”

“Janie, you don’t have to go to 2. Peeta can go with you!” regardless of what either Janie or Peeta says, Katniss is becoming more despondent by the minute.

“No, he can’t, and you know that Katniss. You know this is something I need to do for me. Somethings you just have to do alone.” Janie says, looking Katniss in the eye for reassurance.

Janie left the district for the first time on her own a few days later. She was only gone two weeks, and almost beat the letter she sent home. Two days before Janie was due to return, Katniss and Peeta received a letter:

Dearest Peeta and Katniss,

2 is certainly different when I don’t have you two to around! Gale and Cressida have been really great. They never let me out of their sight, and if I need to, they have a guard ready to take me anywhere. Guess what her name is? Starr. Guess why her name is Starr? Because she was born the year the two of you won your games and her parents named her after you, The Star-Crossed Lovers. I try not to laugh at her, but she says it’s OK. She has no control over her name.

I never was left alone with my grandfather. He’s a sad man, Katniss. All he keeps saying is I would have made a beautiful Victor. It’s hard to hear that and not want to yell at him. But Gale is right when he says I need to be patient. He’s an old man who has lost everything he holds dear. Sometimes I don’t even know if he knows who I am. He keeps calling me Apollonia. That was my mother’s name. He says all of the women in my family were named Apollonia. It’s so weird. Please never call me that!

But I have met him. I see where I “should” have lived. And now I will tell you this. I am so glad I don’t live here. I am so glad Gale and Cressida rescued me from that cave. But mostly I am so glad that I have you two. I can’t wait to be home to see you and the Littles. I miss you all so very much!

Love Always,

Janie.
Katniss, Peeta, and their two children were waiting on the train platform, and as soon as the train stopped, Janie jumped off and into their arms. District 12 was her home, Katniss, Peeta, and the Littles were her family. She never wanted to be anywhere else.

Janie walks into the back of the bakery so quietly, she startles Peeta, who is busy working on a wedding cake fit for a Victor. Or a Victor’s daughter.

“Look at my girl, all grown up,” Peeta says with a touch of melancholy. “Today’s the day, hm?”

“Yes, Peeta, today’s the day!” Janie replies enthusiastically. “I can’t believe it. It seems unreal. Where are Katniss and the Littles?”

“I think they’re in the meadow. Katniss said something about getting more flowers, but I think she’s just trying to distract the kids and give you some peace. They do love you. Almost too much I think!”

“Remember how scared I was when you and Katniss told me you were first going to have a baby?” Janie laughs at the memory. “Katniss was right, though. It did change our family, but only for the better.”

“It did. No one can say we’ve lacked love. Those kids look up to you. You can do no wrong in their eyes.”

Janie smiles at this. She knows that Peeta is feeling a bit blue, like he’s having to say goodbye to someone and he isn’t quite ready too. “Peeta, me getting married? It’s the same thing, you know that, right?”

“Oh, my head knows that Janie bear, but my heart says something different. It says part of me is leaving.”

At this the young woman walks to Peeta and hugs him tightly. “Thank you Peeta. Thank you for saving my life. Thank you for loving me. I don’t care what people Gale and Cressida send my way. You and Katniss are my parents. You are my family. You are the ones who loved me throughout all of the years. And I may be moving out of the house, but I’m still your Janie Bear. And I’m still your partner at the bakery, right?” she says pulling away.

“Second best baker in Panem!” He smiles then he pushes her away. “Now, let me finish up this cake. I’ll meet you all back at the house. Oh! And Katniss left something for you on our bed. Make sure you go get it as soon as you get back to the house.”

As Janie makes her way back to the Village, she takes the time to think about her life. She remembers being that five year old little girl, so in awe of this “Mockingjay”, she remembers the first time Katniss took her out into the woods, waking up one morning and seeing Peeta in the kitchen making breakfast, all of her memories come flooding back. She’s had a good life with Katniss and Peeta, the best life, really. And now she’s getting ready to start a new one with Liam. She can’t believe Peeta gave her his old house as a wedding present.

“What’s in the box, Peeta?” Janie asks at supper. Liam was there, it was about a week after they announced their engagement.

“Just open it up and see, you curious girl!” Katniss reprimands her with a smile

“Peeta… what’s this a key to?” she looks at it warily. Liam knows the family dynamics well enough to sit back and remain quiet for now.

“A house,” he smiles at her.

“I figured that. What house?” she asks, still wary of what is going on.

“My old one. Now that Sue has passed, and her granddaughter has gone to help out Leevy and Mari at the Home, well, someone needed to live there. And since I know of a young couple who are getting ready to have their own toasting, I thought it might be a nice present.”

“You don’t have to do that! You could sell the house?” she rationalizes.

“Why would we sell the house, Janie? We don’t need the money, and you two need a place to start your own lives. And, conveniently,” he smiles at her, “it’s just a few doors down!”

“Part of me is afraid of that, Peeta,” Janie replies with a smile.
"Please, accept it? It’s pretty bare on the inside, but the kitchen is state of the art. You and Liam can do whatever you want to it. Please live there, start a family, make it a happy home." Peeta pleads with his oldest child.

"I don’t know what I have ever done to deserve the two of you, but every day I am thankful for you," she says, wiping tears from the corner of her eyes.

"We love you Janie. We want only the best for you," Katniss tells her, as she pulls her in for a hug. She looks to Liam and says, "And we love you too Liam. Don’t ever forget that."

It isn’t long before she’s back at home. She walks into the house for what she knows is the last time as a Mellark. After the toasting this evening, she’ll be in her own home, with her own husband. It’s amazing how she can be happy, sad, and excited all at the same time. Janie decides it’s a good time to run a bath, get ready. Katniss and the kids will be back soon, probably with arms full of flowers. The people will be gathering in a few hours, so now is her chance to be alone. She remembers that Peeta told her to look on the bed in their room for something, so she carefully opens their door. On the bed is one of the most beautiful dresses she has ever seen. She recognizes it from some of the history books at school. It’s one of Katniss’ dresses from her Victory Tour. The pink one. Janie always loved this dress. On top of it is a note, in Katniss’ careful handwriting:

My dear, dear Janie. Today is your day, and I couldn’t be prouder of you. I remember when I first met you. You talked so much! I used to be so tired after visiting with you. I remember what you said when we first met. You were so disappointed that I wasn’t a real mockingjay, that I was just a regular person, with no wings. Do you know what though? If you were to look closely today, you’d see them. You’d see my wings. I didn’t think mockingjay wings could grow back, but guess what? They can. The can grow back when the bird is given lots of love. That first day I met you, they started to grow then. When you said you’d live with me, they grew a little more. Then Peeta joined us, and I thought I could feel them grow even larger. But now that the Littles are here, and we have Liam, my wings are just as big, just as strong as they were when I was younger. Love made my wings grow back, Janie. And you started that.

When I first met you, and you told me all of your favorite things, I knew, one day, I’d want you to see this dress. I knew you would love it. And when I showed it to you that first time? I was right, wasn’t I? Now I want you to have it. Would you wear it for me today? Wear this ‘something old’, and take that part of my life and make it beautiful? Cinna made this dress for me, I could always feel the love and care he’d sewn into every stitch. So I want to pass that love and care on down to you. Take this old dress, and make it new.

All my love,
Your Mama, Katniss

With wonder on her face, Janie carefully picks up the dress and takes it to her room. Later, after her bath, she hears people beginning to gather in the living room. As she zips up the back of the dress, she hears a soft knock on the door. It’s Katniss. Janie knows this before Katniss even speaks.

"Are you ready Janie? Everyone is here now…”
Author's Note:
Almost two years ago I had an idea: What if Katniss was sentenced to prison instead of being sent back to 12 right away. From that thought, the story of Caged Bird was born.

This entry is something I've had in my drafts for awhile now. I've been picking away at it here and there. While writing Caged Bird I would occasionally get messages wondering what Peeta was doing while Katniss was in 10. After awhile his story began to form in my imagination. So for those who wanted to know Peeta's story, this is for you!

Thank you so much to tianniasfics and louezem for their reading, notes, and ideas. They helped fine tune this piece. And thank you to Suzanne Collins, for giving us Katniss and Peeta. They have taken hold of my imagination and will not let go!

Mixing and Kneading
When Peeta Mellark arrived in District 12, it was with a clean bill of health (other than the moments of flashback that he learned to deal with), a satchel full of the "latest fashions from the Capitol!", and a heavy heart. Even the fresh air of spring, and buds blooming forth couldn't alleviate this feeling that had settled into his chest somewhere around District 6 that seemed to have taken up residence in his heart.

He was happy to finally be discharged from the hospital, finally able to move forward with his life. Except how was he to move forward? Could he just pick up and start a new life knowing his family never would again? Knowing what happened to Katniss?

"She was tried and found guilty Peeta. She's safe, she's taken care of; but no, you can't see her or contact her. Those are the Terms of her imprisonment, that's all we can tell you."

He stepped off of the train platform into the rest of his life...

He stares out the window, the last leg of this final journey home, and hopes Haymitch is around. He needs to speak to him now, more than ever. He's just turned 18, a legal adult. In some ways he feels 118 and others he still feels like that scared 16 year old who wanted to piss his pants when Effie drew his name from that fateful bowl.

As the train pulls into the station in 12, Peeta waits until everyone is off. He doesn't like the feel of people behind him, would rather he be looking at them than having others looking at him. He supposes it's a by-product of the Games, his imprisonment, and the war. All he knows is the idea of someone behind him that he can't see gives him anxiety, and anxiety leads to a lack of self-control, which leads to another episode. He and Dr. Aurelius have worked through all of that. Peeta knows they'll never go away all together, but he has learned to control them. No way would anyone have let him leave if he was out of control.

He picks up his full satchel from the pile of luggage that the porters have formed, and takes a look around at the district before him. It's beginning to be cleaned up, but still too many ghosts around for his liking. He heads to his home, which he has been "assured" is cleaned and ready for his return. He sets off down the lane, ignoring the weight on his heart, ignoring the ghosts that seem to follow him wherever he goes.

He's not too sure what to do with himself those first few days home. It's all wrong, nothing feels right. He only has Haymitch. His family is gone, Delly stayed in the Capitol to train to be a teacher, promising to return as soon as she could. And then there is Katniss. Her mother has gone to 4 to work with the new hospital there. He doubts she'll ever return to 12.

He doesn't want to think about what it might be like if Katniss were here. He gave up dealing with the what-ifs during his therapy with Dr. Aurelius. He learned that what-ifs only lead him in a never ending spiral of self-loathing and doubt. He's learned to deal with the real. The "what is". So, what is real?

He is in 12.
Haymitch is in 12.
His family is dead.

Delly will come back, though she's gone now.
And Katniss is in prison.

That is what is. He can deal with that. He can go to his own home and he can settle in. He can make his way in this new world. Panem is going to need his generation to step up and take their place in the rebuilding. He can do his part. He can...what can he do? He can bake.

He bakes for Haymitch. He bakes for Sae. He bakes for the people of 12. And he bakes for himself. With every press of the dough, he remembers. He remembers who he is. He remembers his life as it was, and remembers that it can be anything he wants it to be now.

When he gets too caught up in his own head, he walks. He walks to the edge of the Village and back, not ready to venture back into town just yet. He'll let Thom and the others do that. He'll feed them as long as he doesn't have to see the carnage. He's seen enough of the dead to last a few lifetimes.

He'd only been on the outskirts of the woods once, when he was younger. It was a dare from his middle brother, and young Peeta made it just a few feet in before the fear of the head peacekeeper came over him and he hightailed it out of there. He remembers this fondly. Remembers the laughter of his brother, but also the admiration in his face. He knows his brother didn't expect him to do it, probably wouldn't do it himself. Peeta has always had an inner strength that overcame fear. This is what has kept him alive all this time.

He makes it his plan to go a bit farther into the woods each day, as his leg allows. Though he's much more secure on it since he Quell, he still gets tired with everyday wear and tear. But he feels closer to Katniss here, and the serenity of the woods calms him, especially on those mornings he's
been awakened from nightmares he's tired of enduring.

The more he ventures into the woods, the more he sees the subtle differences hidden there. How the bark peels back on one tree, but not another. He sees the trees with toadstools around the base, how the green on one tree is just that different from another. As he ventures further in, he creates his own path.

Soon, he discovers a rock ledge that overlooks a valley, surrounded by blackberry bushes. He climbs up and sits down to enjoy the view. He can't put a finger on why, but somehow he knows, just knows that this is Katniss' spot. He can almost feel her spirit here. He didn't realize how much of his anxiety lately was wrapped up in not knowing how Katniss was doing. But here, he can almost feel her. He knows she is going to be ok. It's a spot he will come back to many times over the next five years.

Early one morning, before most anyone is out and about, Peeta hears a howling that is unlike anything he's heard before. At least recently. It's almost like an infant, but by the tone he knows it isn't. He looks out his front window to see a mangy creature with matted orange fur howling up and down the road near Katniss' home.

“Buttercup?”

He walks as quietly and carefully as he can towards the animal, afraid of scaring it off. “Hey kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty.”

The cat turns and looks his way, fur raised up on the back of its neck, “Hey Buttercup. It's me, Peeta, I'm here now...” He tells the feline soothingly, holding his hand out for the feline to smell. Apparently, Buttercup does remember him, because he just as cautiously makes his way toward Peeta.

“What are you doing here, huh? Did you come all the way from 13?” He tells the cat soothingly, afraid to scare it. He tries to focus on what is. There is a cat, Katniss' cat, who needs his help. He tries hard not to think of Prim, dead in the Capitol. Mrs. Everdeen, off in 4. Or Katniss. In prison somewhere. The cat needs him now.

Peeta carefully lifts the cat and brings it into his home. As he cleans him, he allows his grief to pour out, along with the howls of the cat. Somehow, Peeta knows that Buttercup understands. There is no one at the house. No one to help him, no one to care for him. Peeta and Buttercup are a pair of orphans in this new world, orphans who loosely band together for food and occasional support.

Peeta sends Buttercup out the door, and day after day the cat refuses to willingly come back to his house. “Stupid cat, you're just as stubborn as Katniss!” He says as he retrieves the howling cat from the front porch of the Everdeen house. “I know I'm just going to have to let you in here,” and from then on, Peeta makes a stop twice a day to Katniss' home, to let the cat in and out. Luckily he still has the extra set of keys Mrs. Everdeen gave him, “for safe keeping” after their first games. She said she felt more comfortable knowing one of the neighbors had an extra set, “just in case.”

He is out in the woods later that day when he sees them. Primroses in a small clearing. The woods, the cat, the flowers, they all point to one thing. He may not believe in “signs” like Effie does, but all of this gives him an idea. He can't help Katniss where she is now, but he can take care of things here. When she does come home, she will have a place to come home to. He rushes back to the shed behind his house and pulls out a shovel and a wheelbarrow. He digs the plants up as carefully as he can. He knows just where to put them, along the side of Katniss' house that gets the morning sun.

Soon Peeta finds himself caring for two houses, and not just his own. He's good with that. He feels like this is the one thing he can do for Katniss while she is gone. It's not too difficult, and he finds his day falling into a steady rhythm.

"What you been doing these days? I don't see you around too much," Haymitch asks one day. He's come over for a “visit”, but Peeta is pretty sure he's just checking up on him. When was the last time Haymitch ever went to “visit” anyone? They sit at the kitchen table over tea and cookies.

"Not much. Go let Buttercup out, check out Katniss' house. Baking in the morning. I go for walks in the afternoon. Let Buttercup back in. Paint some at night. You?"

"Drink. Sleep. Eat. Well, sometimes,” he tips the flask he holds in his hands into his mouth rather nonchalantly. "I've been going to town. Looks a lot different then when you first got back."

Peeta swallows deeply, looking right at his former mentor. "Yeah?"

"Yep. All the debts is cleared up...” his voice trails off, but Peeta can hear what he's really saying. He's saying that the bodies are gone, the wreckage is gone. If Peeta wanted to go to town, it might be ok.

"Sounds good," Peeta nods. "Like the District is getting back on it's feet," he adds hopefully.

"It is. They appreciate the bread you make for them, you know."

"Good. Glad to hear I can be of help somehow," Peeta knows Haymitch is getting at something, but he is certainly not making it easy for the man.

Haymitch looks down at a large envelope in his hands, then passes it to Peeta. "Thom wanted me to give this to you.".

Peeta looks questioningly, “What's this?"

"Read it for yourself," the older man tells him as he stands to leave. He's about to the door when he drops one final truth for Peeta, “Oh, and I guess there are new people moving in all the time. Thom wanted me to give this to you.".

"Peeta?"
"What."

"Let's get you up and home."

"Leave me alone Haymitch. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You look like shit."

"It's this darn cat," Peeta swings his hand out. "It knows it's supposed to go in now. But it won't. And I can't stay out here all night long! I've got too much to do..." and he continues in this vein until Haymitch puts a careful hand on his shoulder.

"It's OK Peeta. I'll take care of the cat. You go home."

"No! You don't get it! It's my responsibility to take care of Buttercup! It's up to me!"

"Peeta, you know that the cat won't tell Katniss that you didn't let it in one night, right?"

And just like that, Haymitch has gotten to the bottom of Peeta's anxiety. "But we said we'd protect each other!" said Always! Haymitch! But I'm not doing anything! She's just sitting, wasting away for all I know, and I should be here taking care of things until she gets back, but I can't even do that!"

"Hey. It's ok. She's fine. She's not wasting away Peeta," he tells him soothingly, bringing him in for a rare hug, gently putting his head.

"How do you know that though?" Peeta asks through the tears, his voice muffled into Haymitch's shirt.

"Because Thom and I get reports on her."

This gets his attention. He pushes back a bit and looks at Haymitch, "Thom? Why Thom?"

"Because he's been given the position of head of the district. He's been here from the start, and the government thinks he's the most reliable one," he explains.

This emboldens Peeta, "I want to see them."

Haymitch is shaking his head, as if he already knew what Peeta would say, "You can't."

"Yes I can. And if you won't tell me, I'll go right to Thom. I deserve to know what's happening to Katniss."

"Fine," he says without too much of a fight, "I'll see what I can do. But don't expect much. I think, the best thing for you to do right now though, is get your ass up off her porch. Acting like a stalker isn't going to make your case to Thom."

This makes Peeta chuckle, and he stands up to brushes himself off.

"Good," Haymitch says. "Now, let's get you home. I think it's time you had a diversion. Have you even looked at the letter I gave you?"

"No," he answers a bit ashamed.

"Well do it. It's time you started thinking about yourself. You've got to live your life for you. Then, when she comes home, she'll have a boy to come home to."

It's a rough night. Peeta thinks about all that Haymitch has said. Katniss isn't wasting away, but he is. He's been so caught up in his worry over her, that he's forgotten about himself. The next morning, he picks up the envelope and reads it. Then he heads into town to see Thom.

"Peeta! Good to see you!" Thom says as he reaches out his hand in greeting.

His office is in a makeshift building, but Peeta can see the construction going up all around the former square. It's the same as it ever was, only cleaner, with no coal dust coating everything. From what Haymitch has told him, it never will be that dirty again since they're building a medicine factory over where the mines used to stand.

"Thanks Thom. Town looks good. Sorry I wasn't around to help out," he says while he shakes hands.

"Peeta, don't even think about that. You helped plenty. If it weren't for your bread, we wouldn't have the workers to do the job."

"Well, it's not much..."

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"Well, it's not much..."

"It's just what we needed. Now, have a seat and tell me what can I do for you today?"

"It's about that letter you sent..."

Peeta at times wondered if adding the construction of a new bakery and starting up a new business was actually adding more stress on him, but he soon fell into a pattern, a rhythm. Up in the morning, into town to work, stop in the woods on the way home, especially on those days when the pressures would mount. Peeta Mellark is now not only a resident who bakes for others in District 12, but a business owner as well.

Every morning he notices the rhythms of District 12. He hears the birds sing on his way to town. As he enters the front of his shop, he hears the shouts of "Good morning" the early risers pass to each other on their way to their respective businesses. He picks up the broom to sweep off the front stoop, waves to passer-byers, greets them as he would an old friend, because that's what they are. Not a new merchant class, but a group of people willing to take a chance on a bombed out district. After sweeping the stoop, he heads to the back of the shop, ready to prep for the day. As he wipes the counter down, the back door propped open, he can see the apple tree sapling planted that tree, he hopes, will represent another road, one that brings her back to him forever. Planting that tree, he hopes, he will represent another road, one that brings her back to him forever.

Peeta is living his life for himself now, but a part of him holds back, waiting for the day Katniss returns to 12. He knows he won't fully be able to move on until she can. They're still a team, even when separated by time and space.

On the one year anniversary of his return to District 12, Peeta Mellark, closed the bakery and set off to spend the day in the woods, to take stock of his life. Sitting on the overlook, the feeling that is so Katniss surrounding him, he realizes what has occurred over these last twelve months: He's found a place in the community, his small business is taking off, and he seems to have found a balance in his life. And his satchel of clothes that were in the "latest fashion" of the Capitol still sits, unworn, in his closet.
He's just as confused as he's ever been.

get married, even though she didn't really want to. How she told everyone he was the mutt.

games, when he thought it was all real and she said it was just for show. How she suggested they

him. How she would look away from him all those times. How she broke his heart after the first

voted to have another Hunger Games. He remembers how she yelled for Gale to help her, and not

he said he couldn't, and he meant that. But he also remembers his feeling of despair when she

house, and he won't allow that. But his feelings for her run hot and cold.

Buttercup, takes care of the primroses and the other plants along the side of the house. Makes sure

He still oversees her house, though Sae is there to do the day to day work. He takes care of

"How are things really going, Peeta?" Delly asks him one night after supper. "Don't say fine,
because I hear you walking around at night. I hear you scream. I'm not deaf, and I'm not stupid, so
don't treat me that way."

"You never let me get away with anything, did you? I might as well let you know...." He fills her

in on his life since he returned to 12, both the good and the bad. "And it wouldn't be so bad if I just

knew how Katniss was doing. I mean, Thom gives me the briefs, but I wish I could see her. I wish I

knew what she was thinking, you know? I feel like I'm just waiting for the rest of my life to

start, and it can't until I know how she is. And what if she never comes back to 12, Delly? What'll

I do if I never actually see her again?" He hates to sound so desperate, so pathetic.

"Peeta Mellark. You listen to me!" Delly grabs his hand, looks him in the eye, and tells him in no

uncertain terms. "Katniss is going to be fine. I know she is. She's a fighter, she will make it! I'm

still so angry with how they treated her after the war! Anyone who was in 13 could tell you Coin

was bad news. Katniss saved us from another dictator!"

Peeta interrupts her at this. "I know that, and you know that. But the rest of the world isn't so sure

Delly."

"And as to her coming back," she continues, as if Peeta never spoke, "She will be here. I know

she will. She loves you Peeta. You have to believe that!"

"When it comes to Katniss, I'm not sure what to believe anymore Delly," he says with finality. He

gets up and begins clearing the table. The conversation is definitely over.

Peeta enjoys having Delly and Danyel around. It's nice to feel like he has someone his own age,
hanging out with Haymitch gets old, and even though Thom is really only a few years older, it's

still not the same.

He first notices the new girl walking through town with a string of young children following along

beside and behind her. After asking around a bit, he finds out her name is Rhea and she's in

charge of the new Community Home. He can tell, just by the look of her that this Home is quite
different than the one from his past. The children seem happy and well cared for, and she seems

pleasant enough.

She's a pretty girl, with brown hair and the appearance of one who would understand how to take

a good joke. For the next little while, he watches from a distance. Making note of the time of day

she passes by the bakery, how she looks in and smiles, how the elder of her charges giggle when

they see her do this. Peeta isn't looking for attention from others, but he can't deny it makes him

feel good to think someone might be looking at him. It's been awhile since anyone has done that,

he thinks.

A few weeks later, he notices Levy with them. When he talks to Delly next he learns that Levy

is now helping with the Home.

"Gale and Cressida were here, did you know that?" Delly asks

No, Peeta thinks, he didn't know that. Why would Gale stop by 12? And he's not sure if he's

annoyed that he didn't stop by the bakery or not. The only thing they ever really had in common

was Katniss, and since she's away in 10, what good is that connection?

"Well, they were just here for a few hours. Seems Gale found a little girl in the caves surrounding

2 when they were doing a sweep after another attack from the Loyalists there. Everyone was dead

except for this little one. I think they call her Jane or Janie or something along those lines.

Anyway, Gale and Cressida thought that the home in 12 would be the safest place for this little
girl, so they dropped her off. Seems like she's a real handful, so Rhea hired Levy, and now they

work together!"

"Wow. OK. Umm, that's a lot to take in at once Delly. Have you ever thought about pausing for a

breath?" Peeta jokes, partly because it's true and partly because he's still digesting all of this

information. Now that Delly says it, he does remember seeing Rhea holding a little girl that

seemed new and not as content as the others.

"I think I'm going to start sending over some extra baked goods to the Home, what do you think,

Delly?"

"I think it's a great idea. I would guess that they would be grateful for any kind of help. Things are

still so tight after the war. But, are you sure it's just because you want to help Peeta?" Delly gives

him a teasing look.

"Yes Delly," he sighs, afraid to admit that he might be a little attracted to this newcomer. Afraid of

what that means when he thinks of Katniss. He's becoming more and more confused as time goes

on.

He still oversees her house, though Sae is there to do the day to day work. He takes care of

Buttercup, takes care of the primroses and the other plants along the side of the house. Makes sure

the lawn and yard are maintained. He can't imagine having Katniss come home to a run down

house, and he won't allow that. But his feelings for her run hot and cold.

He remembers how good it felt to kiss her all of those times, how that kiss in the sewers was the

only thing that stood between his sanity and joining those lurid mutts. How, after she shot Coin

and he knew, he knew she was going to try to kill herself, how she told him to let her go, and how

he said he couldn't, and he meant that. But he also remembers his feeling of despair when she

voted to have another Hunger Games. He remembers how she yelled for Gale to help her, and not

him. How she would look away from him all those times. How she broke his heart after the first

games, when he thought it was all real and she said it was just for show. How she suggested they

get married, even though she didn't really want to. How she told everyone he was the mutt.

He's just as confused as he's ever been.
The third year after Peeta Mellark returns to District 12 is a rough year. Dr. Aurelius has officially put him on "maintenance" which is a fancy way of saying, "You'll never be cured, but I'm done with you." That's how Peeta interprets it at least. It's hard for Peeta to stay positive about much. He's not sure about that "clean bill of health" most days.

Peeta notices Dolly and Thom's relationship seems to be coming along and it makes him feel pathetic and sad. He's almost 21 and the only relationship he's ever had was forced on him by the Capitol. It wasn't even real. Sure, Katniss kissed him in both arenas, and he's pretty sure she put a lot of feeling into those kisses (didn't Gale tell him that in Tigri's basements?), but what does he really know? And why is he waiting for someone who may never want to see him again? At least may he want a relationship with him? W asn't the screaming for Gale after she shot Coin? Why Gale and not him? Because she loves Gale. He's sure of it now. Of course, from what he's heard, Gale is with Cressida, but he doesn't really know this for sure, because even when Gale is in 12 (which isn't frequent, sure), does he ever stop to see Peeta? Not really. Apparently visiting with your former squad members isn't official duty or something.

Peeta spends most of his time angry and stuck in his thoughts. Rhea begins to stop by the bakery more often, and their friendship begins to grow. He likes her. She's funny, she's easy to talk to, and honestly, she's quite attractive. They begin to spend more time together. They go for walks, she'll stop by his house, and he goes to visit her at the Home. He likes spending time with the children, and bringing them food makes him feel useful and wanted. He's not sure he's ever felt this way in his entire life.

"What are you doing, boy?" Haymitch seems to have been keeping an eye on his activities, which annoys Peeta unreasonably. They're in Peeta's kitchen one evening, as Haymitch has stopped by for his occasional supper.

"What do you mean, old man?" he asks, perturbed at Haymitch, who only calls him "boy" when he's in "mentor mode," which means he wants to tell him how to live his life.

"With that girl? Rhea? I mean, not that it's any of my business what you do. You're a grown man and all..." Somehow Peeta knows Haymitch's words don't all up to his actions here. Haymitch cares what Peeta is doing, and can't wait to tell him his opinion.

"Nothing. We're friends, that's all. Why? What business is it of yours anyway?" he asks, wiping his counter down, putting enough pressure on the cloth to turn the granite counter top to a shiny metallic.

"Not my business at all. Just wondering is all." he shakes his head casually.

"Well stop. A man and a woman can be friends, you know."

"Oh I know alright. But I also know, more often than not, someone gets more attached than the other. Just making sure that's what you wanted."

"You think what? I'm being unfaithful to Katniss or something? Because there's really nothing between Katniss and me, you know. We're probably not even friends anyway."

Peeta abruptly stops before he gives away more of his feelings than he wants. He's said too much already.

"I didn't say anything about Katniss. That's on you."

"With that girl? Rhea? I mean, not that it's any of my business what you do. You're a grown man and all..." Somehow Peeta knows Haymitch's words don't all up to his actions here. Haymitch cares what Peeta is doing, and can't wait to tell him his opinion.

"I'm fine Haymitch. You know, sometimes I like you a lot better when you're drinking, except I have to deal with your damned greese then."

"Well. I know when I'm not wanted."

"What are you doing, boy?" Haymitch seems to have been keeping an eye on his activities, which

"Fine. Oh, I came here for a reason, there's a new report about Katniss. Thom says if you're interested, to come on over." Haymitch helps himself to a goat cheese and apple tart and a mug of coffee before he heads out.

He spends the next few weeks only going to his home and the bakery. No more stops at Katniss'.

"What are you doing, boy?" Haymitch asks, perturbed at Peeta, who only calls him "boy" when he's in "mentor mode," which means he wants to tell him how to live his life.

"What's going on with you?"

"I don't want to hear anymore about Katniss, that's all. Why? What business is it of yours anyway?" he asks, wiping his counter down, putting enough pressure on the cloth to turn the granite counter top to a shiny metallic.

"Fine. Oh, I came here for a reason, there's a new report about Katniss. Thom says if you're interested, to come on over." Haymitch helps himself to a goat cheese and apple tart and a mug of coffee before he heads out.

Peeta stands there for awhile. Thinking. He's not sure what to do. On the one hand, he wants to know more about Katniss, but on the other hand, he's so tired. He just wants to live a normal life. He's so tired of this miserable half life he feels. He decides to forget seeing Thom, deciding it's time to live his own life.

One night, after the kids are put to bed, Peeta and Rhea sit up talking. They've enjoyed a couple of glasses of wine each, nothing too much as Peeta doesn't trust his mind yet, afraid too much alcohol will bring about a flashback. But enough to feel calm and mellow. He enjoys her company, she's funny and honest with him, and kind of cute too. She tells him how she had a crush on him after he won his first games, how her boyfriend Matz would tease her about it all of the time. She blushes as she laughs about her old self.

Peeta, for his part, can't help but feel flattered. He was such a mess at that time. Still battling his feelings for Katniss, coming to terms with losing his leg, and battling the nightmares that only seemed to get worse as time went on. Too think some random girl in another district had a thing for him is kind of empowering. The 16 year old Peeta hidden deep inside of him feels somewhat vindicated.

As they talk into the evening, they move closer, soon they are right next to each other, his hand on the back of the couch, hers on his leg. He thinks, "I could just lean in and kiss her." So he does. She meets him halfway, almost as if she thought the same thing. Her lips are soft, supple, and she has the tang of the wine still on her tongue. He's not felt this good in...he's not sure how long. His hand snakes from the back of the couch into her hair, it's soft. Softer than Katniss'...
And just like that, the moment is ended. It's like he hears someone yelling his name in the distance, getting closer. He slowly breaks off the kiss, "I should probably get going. Gotta get up early, bakers hours you know," he says bashfully.

"Yeah," she smiles back. "These kiddos will be up early too. Thanks, um. Thanks for the company tonight Peeta. I had a good time."

"Me too. I'll see you later?" he nods.

"Sure! I'll stop by tomorrow maybe?" she says brightly.

"Yeah," he says standing, rubbing his hands down his pant legs nervously, as he fidgets, "I'd better get going, gotta walk home. Night?" He says, and heads toward the door. Just as he's leaving, Leevy comes in.

"Oh hey! You're still here?" she asks enthusiastically, looking between the two of them.

"I was just leaving. See you around Leevy. Bye Rhea." And he heads out into the night, purposefully ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach.

The night after Peeta kisses Rhea, he dreams of caves and beaches and sewers. He knows he will never be free of the hold Katniss has on him. And he isn't ready to move on, not while her life is still not her own.

When he sees Rhea the next day, he tells her, "That kiss was a mistake. I'm so sorry, truly. I'm sorry, but I can't be anything more to you than just a friend. And you're too good of a person to lead on when I know my heart isn't in it."

"It's Katniss isn't it?" she asks, the hurt in her eyes shining through.

"Yeah. It's Katniss," he tells her, looking anywhere but at her face.

"She's certainly rooted in your head." Rhea tells him somewhat sadly.

"She is. No matter what I do, she's there. I'm sorry…"

"Don't Peeta. Don't say it again," she holds up her hand. "You don't have anything to apologize for. We'll blame it on the wine. How's that?"

"Wouldn't that be nice. But I can't," he shakes his head sadly.

"Fine Peeta, have it your way. But can we still be friends? There aren't too many of us around, I'd hate to lose you."

"Of course, Rhea!"

"Good. Now I need to get going. Stuff to do before the older children come home from school. And Leevy needs a break from the younger ones," Rhea tells him, leaving quickly.

It takes a few weeks, but soon their friendship seems back on track. Peeta is always careful to keep a safe distance from Rhea, afraid of sending her mixed messages.

One day, as they're sitting in the meadow, watching the younger children running around, Rhea asks him, "Why did you do it Peeta? Why did you sacrifice so much for her?"

This seems to come from out of the blue, but Peeta has no doubt who Rhea is speaking of.

"You have to know what it was like in 12 before the war I guess," Peeta tells her. "It wasn't a beautiful place, kind of grey and dark. But there were glimpses of beauty. The way the meadow flowers looked, how you could see the distant mountains. But mostly it was dirty and grungy. And for people in the Seam, the coal miners and their families, it was even worse. We were poor enough in town but people in the Seam had nothing. Only what little they could earn in the mines. So when Katniss' father died, she lost pretty much everything. People around town spoke of her mother and how she was neglecting the girls. Her mother was raised in Town and moved to the Seam when she married her father, so she was always a source of gossip. People talked about how skinny Katniss and Prim were getting.

"One day, it was early spring so the rain was cold and miserable, I heard my mother yelling about Seam trash stealing the garbage. I looked out, and there was Katniss sitting under the apple tree. She looked like she'd given up. I'd had a crush on her since forever, so when I saw her there, ready to die, as a part of me wanted to give up too. While I was thinking all of this, the bread I was in charge of burned. Mother was so angry with me, she hit me with a rolling pin, and told me to feed the bread to the pigs. I gave it to Katniss instead. That was the last time I saw Katniss looking so pitiful. It seemed like overnight she transformed into this majestie hunter. Everyone knew it was Katniss who saved her family. And even my mother respected her for it. She was 11 years old at the time. From then on, Katniss was responsible for not only herself but her sister and mother as well. She sacrificed her life for theirs more often than once. More than just that time she volunteered for Prim. I just decided Katniss had suffered enough. She deserved some kind of happiness. That's why I did it. Why I still do it."

Resting and Rising

The fourth year Peeta Mellark is in District 12. A woman named Anya moves to the District, a "counsellor" they call her. It's a new program, spearheaded by Dr. Aurelius and his colleagues in the Capitol. Provide counsellors to the citizens of Panem, someone to talk to and help them work through their lingering fears. It's Anya who helps Peeta deal with all of his feelings of anger, frustration, love, and yes even hate he sometimes feels for Katniss.

"It's like I'm stuck in this time warp Anya. I can't move forward, and there is no going back. So I'm stuck, waiting. I thought maybe I could move on with another girl, you know? I'm 21, and the only real relationship I've ever had wasn't real. It was all for show. I've barely kissed a girl, let alone had sex. What do I know about anything?"

"Mr. Mellark. You survived two Hunger Games, torture, the hijacking of your personality, and a war. Do you really think, that in light of all that, the fact that you've never had sex makes you pathetic? Honestly?"

She suggests he try something new. So Peeta builds a garden. At first he thinks of just creating a small container garden on his back porch, but he soon realizes that what Anya meant was, he needed to get his hands dirty. He needed a place to direct his conflicting feelings - because Danyel was starting to complain that he was abusing the dough. Peeta decides this garden could feed more than just him. So he uses the produce just as much as Delly could at the school, or he could in the bakery and at home. Even Haymitch could use some for himself and his geese. Peeta looks around, he finds the best place for this little plot is in the last place he really wants it to go. In Katniss' yard.

He was creating this garden to deal with his feelings for Katniss. Now he will have to see her...
house, think of her every day. He laughs at the way it's starting to work out. It seems that no matter how hard he tries, he truly will never let Katniss go.

By the time the garden sprouts, and he brings in his first fruits, he realizes what his subconscious has known all along. Katniss Everdeen is in his heart, and she is there to stay.

Peeta Bakes

The fifth year after Peeta returned to District 12, Katniss returns. He first sees her as he's coming out of the bakery. He and Rhea were laughing about some antic Janie had gotten up to. He can't believe his eyes.

"Katniss?" He knew she was coming, but for some reason, it seemed too good to be true. He didn't want to place his hopes on anything in regards to Katniss Everdeen and her future. To think about that would be too hard. Because what if she doesn't care anymore? What if she never did? What if she's found a way to go to 4 to be with her mother? The questions surround him like the smoke of burned bread, irritating his eyes, and making him want to leave. So when he sees her, standing in the middle of the square looking his way, it's as if all of those hopes and dreams he'd pushed to the side finally decide to make their way up front. As soon as he says her name, he sees shock and not a little fear appear in her beautiful grey eyes. Before he can say another word, she turns and bolts into the woods.

"So, that's Katniss Everdeen?" Rhea looks at him and asks noncommittally.

"Sure is," Peeta smiles after Katniss.

"But, why did she run into the woods?"

"With Katniss, I'd expect nothing else," and shaking his head with a grin, he goes back into the bakery. Katniss is home. She's safe and sound. It's all he can ask for right now.

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