

SUZANNE COLLINS THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE



ЭКСКЛЮЗИВНОЕ ЧТЕНИЕ  
НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

**СЬЮЗЕН КОЛЛИНЗ**

# ГОЛОДНЫЕ ИГРЫ: И ВСПЫХНЕТ ПЛАМЯ



**2000 СЛОВ**

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КОММЕНТАРИЙ**

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Сьюзен Коллинз

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Hunger Games: Catching Fire**

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**Сюзан Коллинз / Suzanne Collins**  
**Голодные игры: И вспыхнет пламя /**  
**The Hunger Games: Catching Fire**

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## Part I

### The Spark

#### 1

I clasp the flask between my hands even though the warmth from the tea has long since leached into the frozen air. My muscles are clenched tight against the cold. If a pack of wild dogs were to appear at this moment, the odds of scaling a tree before they attacked are not in my favor. I should get up, move around, and work the stiffness from my limbs. But instead I sit, as motionless as the rock beneath me, while the dawn begins to lighten the woods. I can't fight the sun. I can only watch helplessly as it drags me into a day that I've been dreading for months.

By noon they will all be at my new house in the Victor's Village. The reporters, the camera crews, even Effie Trinket, my old escort, will have made their way to District 12 from the Capitol. I wonder if Effie will still be wearing that silly pink wig, or if she'll be sporting some other unnatural color especially for the Victory Tour. There will be others waiting, too. A staff to cater to my every need on the long train trip. A prep team to beautify me for public appearances. My stylist and friend, Cinna, who designed the gorgeous outfits that first made the audience take notice of me in the Hunger Games.

If it were up to me, I would try to forget the Hunger Games entirely. Never speak of them. Pretend they were nothing but a bad dream. But the Victory Tour makes that impossible. Strategically placed almost midway between the annual Games, it is the Capitol's way of keeping the horror fresh and immediate. Not only are we in the districts forced to remember the iron grip of the Capitol's power each year, we are forced to celebrate it. And this year, I am one of the stars of the show. I will have to travel from district to district, to stand before the cheering crowds who secretly loathe me, to look down into the faces of the families whose children I have killed...

The sun persists in rising, so I make myself stand. All my joints complain and my left leg has been asleep for so long that it takes several minutes of pacing to bring the feeling back into it. I've been in the woods three hours, but as I've made no real attempt at hunting, I have nothing to show for it. It doesn't matter for my mother and little sister, Prim, anymore. They can afford to buy butcher meat in town, although none of us likes it any better than fresh game. But my best friend, Gale Hawthorne, and his family will be depending on today's haul and I can't let them down. I start the hour-and-a-half trek it will take to cover our snare line. Back when we were in school, we had time in the afternoons to check the line and hunt and gather and still get back to trade in town. But now that Gale has gone to work in the coal mines—and I have nothing to do all day—I've taken over the job.

By this time Gale will have clocked in at the mines, taken the stomach-churning elevator ride into the depths of the earth, and be pounding away at a coal seam. I know what it's like down there. Every year in school, as part of our training, my class had to tour the mines. When I was little, it was just unpleasant. The claustrophobic tunnels, foul air, suffocating darkness on all sides. But after my father and several other miners were killed in an explosion, I could barely force myself onto the elevator. The annual trip became an enormous source of anxiety. Twice I made myself so sick in anticipation of it that my mother kept me home because she thought I had contracted the flu.

I think of Gale, who is only really alive in the woods, with its fresh air and sunlight and clean, flowing water. I don't know how he stands it. Well ... yes, I do. He stands it because it's the way to feed his mother and two younger brothers and sister. And here I am with buckets of money, far more than enough to feed both our families now, and he won't take a single coin. It's even hard for him to let me bring in meat, although he'd surely have kept my mother and Prim supplied if I'd been killed

in the Games. I tell him he's doing me a favor, that it drives me nuts to sit around all day. Even so, I never drop off the game while he's at home. Which is easy since he works twelve hours a day.

The only time I really get to see Gale now is on Sundays, when we meet up in the woods to hunt together. It's still the best day of the week, but it's not like it used to be before, when we could tell each other anything. The Games have spoiled even that. I keep hoping that as time passes we'll regain the ease between us, but part of me knows it's futile. There's no going back.

I get a good haul from the traps—eight rabbits, two squirrels, and a beaver that swam into a wire contraption Gale designed himself. He's something of a whiz with snares, rigging them to bent saplings so they pull the kill out of the reach of predators, balancing logs on delicate stick triggers, weaving inescapable baskets to capture fish. As I go along, carefully resetting each snare, I know I can never quite replicate his eye for balance, his instinct for where the prey will cross the path. It's more than experience. It's a natural gift. Like the way I can shoot at an animal in almost complete darkness and still take it down with one arrow.

By the time I make it back to the fence that surrounds District 12, the sun is well up. As always, I listen a moment, but there's no telltale hum of electrical current running through the chain link. There hardly ever is, even though the thing is supposed to be charged full-time. I wriggle through the opening at the bottom of the fence and come up in the Meadow, just a stone's throw from my home. My old home. We still get to keep it since officially it's the designated dwelling of my mother and sister. If I should drop dead right now, they would have to return to it. But at present, they're both happily installed in the new house in the Victor's Village, and I'm the only one who uses the squat little place where I was raised. To me, it's my real home.

I go there now to switch my clothes. Exchange my father's old leather jacket for a fine wool coat that always seems too tight in the shoulders. Leave my soft, worn hunting boots for a pair of expensive machine-made shoes that my mother thinks are more appropriate for someone of my status. I've already stowed my bow and arrows in a hollow log in the woods. Although time is ticking away, I allow myself a few minutes to sit in the kitchen. It has an abandoned quality with no fire on the hearth, no cloth on the table. I mourn my old life here. We barely scraped by, but I knew where I fit in, I knew what my place was in the tightly interwoven fabric that was our life. I wish I could go back to it because, in retrospect, it seems so secure compared with now, when I am so rich and so famous and so hated by the authorities in the Capitol.

A wailing at the back door demands my attention. I open it to find Buttercup, Prim's scruffy old tomcat. He dislikes the new house almost as much as I do and always leaves it when my sister's at school. We've never been particularly fond of each other, but now we have this new bond. I let him in, feed him a chunk of beaver fat, and even rub him between the ears for a bit. "You're hideous, you know that, right?" I ask him. Buttercup nudges my hand for more petting, but we have to go. "Come on, you." I scoop him up with one hand, grab my game bag with the other, and haul them both out onto the street. The cat springs free and disappears under a bush.

The shoes pinch my toes as I crunch along the cinder street. Cutting down alleys and through backyards gets me to Gale's house in minutes. His mother, **Hazelle**<sup>1</sup>, sees me through the window, where she's bent over the kitchen sink. She dries her hands on her apron and disappears to meet me at the door.

I like Hazelle. Respect her. The explosion that killed my father took out her husband as well, leaving her with three boys and a baby due any day. Less than a week after she gave birth, she was out hunting the streets for work. The mines weren't an option, what with a baby to look after, but she managed to get laundry from some of the merchants in town. At fourteen, Gale, the eldest of the kids, became the main supporter of the family. He was already signed up for tesserae, which entitled them to a meager supply of grain and oil in exchange for his entering his name extra times in the

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<sup>1</sup> **Hazelle** – Хейзел

drawing to become a tribute. On top of that, even back then, he was a skilled trapper. But it wasn't enough to keep a family of five without Hazelle working her fingers to the bone on that washboard. In winter her hands got so red and cracked, they bled at the slightest provocation. Still would if it wasn't for a salve my mother concocted. But they are determined, Hazelle and Gale, that the other boys, twelve-year-old Rory and ten-year-old Vick, and the baby, four-year-old Posy, will never have to sign up for tesserae.

Hazelle smiles when she sees the game. She takes the beaver by the tail, feeling its weight. "He's going to make a nice stew." Unlike Gale, she has no problem with our hunting arrangement.

"Good pelt, too," I answer. It's comforting here with Hazelle. Weighing the merits of the game, just as we always have. She pours me a mug of herb tea, which I wrap my chilled fingers around gratefully. "You know, when I get back from the tour, I was thinking I might take **Rory**<sup>2</sup> out with me sometimes. After school. Teach him to shoot."

Hazelle nods. "That'd be good. Gale means to, but he's only got his Sundays, and I think he likes saving those for you."

I can't stop the redness that floods my cheeks. It's stupid, of course. Hardly anybody knows me better than Hazelle. Knows the bond I share with Gale. I'm sure plenty of people assumed that we'd eventually get married even if I never gave it any thought. But that was before the Games. Before my fellow tribute, Peeta Mellark, announced he was madly in love with me. Our romance became a key strategy for our survival in the arena. Only it wasn't just a strategy for Peeta. I'm not sure what it was for me. But I know now it was nothing but painful for Gale. My chest tightens as I think about how, on the Victory Tour, Peeta and I will have to present ourselves as lovers again.

I gulp my tea even though it's too hot and push back from the table. "I better get going. Make myself presentable for the cameras."

Hazelle hugs me. "Enjoy the food."

"Absolutely," I say.

My next stop is the Hob, where I've traditionally done the bulk of my trading. Years ago it was a warehouse to store coal, but when it fell into disuse, it became a meeting place for illegal trades and then blossomed into a full-time black market. If it attracts a somewhat criminal element, then I belong here, I guess. Hunting in the woods surrounding District 12 violates at least a dozen laws and is punishable by death.

Although they never mention it, I owe the people who frequent the Hob. Gale told me that Greasy Sae, the old woman who serves up soup, started a collection to sponsor Peeta and me during the Games. It was supposed to be just a Hob thing, but a lot of other people heard about it and chipped in. I don't know exactly how much it was, and the price of any gift in the arena was exorbitant. But for all I know, it made the difference between my life and death.

It's still odd to drag open the front door with an empty game bag, with nothing to trade, and instead feel the heavy pocket of coins against my hip. I try to hit as many stalls as possible, spreading out my purchases of coffee, buns, eggs, yarn, and oil. As an afterthought, I buy three bottles of white liquor from a one-armed woman named Ripper, a victim of a mine accident who was smart enough to find a way to stay alive.

The liquor isn't for my family. It's for Haymitch, who acted as mentor for Peeta and me in the Games. He's surly, violent, and drunk most of the time. But he did his job—more than his job—because for the first time in history, two tributes were allowed to win. So no matter who Haymitch is, I owe him, too. And that's for always. I'm getting the white liquor because a few weeks ago he ran out and there was none for sale and he had a withdrawal, shaking and screaming at terrifying things only he could see. He scared Prim to death and, frankly, it wasn't much fun for me to see him like that, either. Ever since then I've been sort of stockpiling the stuff just in case there's a shortage again.

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<sup>2</sup> **Rory** – Рори



Cray, our Head Peacekeeper, frowns when he sees me with the bottles. He's an older man with a few strands of silver hair combed sideways above his bright red face. "That stuff's too strong for you, girl." He should know. Next to Haymitch, Cray drinks more than anyone I've ever met.

"Aw, my mother uses it in medicines," I say indifferently.

"Well, it'd kill just about anything," he says, and slaps down a coin for a bottle.

When I reach Greasy Sae's stall, I boost myself up to sit on the counter and order some soup, which looks to be some kind of gourd and bean mixture. A Peacekeeper named **Darius**<sup>3</sup> comes up and buys a bowl while I'm eating. As law enforcers go, he's one of my favorites. Never really throwing his weight around, usually good for a joke. He's probably in his twenties, but he doesn't seem much older than I do. Something about his smile, his red hair that sticks out every which way, gives him a boyish quality.

"Aren't you supposed to be on a train?" he asks me.

"They're collecting me at noon," I answer.

"Shouldn't you look better?" he asks in a loud whisper. I can't help smiling at his teasing, in spite of my mood. "Maybe a ribbon in your hair or something?" He flicks my braid with his hand and I brush him away.

"Don't worry. By the time they get through with me I'll be unrecognizable," I say.

"Good," he says. "Let's show a little district pride for a change, Miss Everdeen. Hm?" He shakes his head at Greasy Sae in mock disapproval and walks off to join his friends.

"I'll want that bowl back," Greasy Sae calls after him, but since she's laughing, she doesn't sound particularly stern. "Gale going to see you off?" she asks me.

"No, he wasn't on the list," I say. "I saw him Sunday, though."

"Think he'd have made the list. Him being your cousin and all," she says wryly.

It's just one more part of the lie the Capitol has concocted. When Peeta and I made it into the final eight in the Hunger Games, they sent reporters to do personal stories about us. When they asked about my friends, everyone directed them to Gale. But it wouldn't do, what with the romance I was playing out in the arena, to have my best friend be Gale. He was too handsome, too male, and not the least bit willing to smile and play nice for the cameras. We do resemble each other, though, quite a bit. We have that Seam look. Dark straight hair, olive skin, gray eyes. So some genius made him my cousin. I didn't know about it until we were already home, on the platform at the train station, and my mother said, "Your cousins can hardly wait to see you!" Then I turned and saw Gale and Hazelle and all the kids waiting for me, so what could I do but go along?

Greasy Sae knows we're not related, but even some of the people who have known us for years seem to have forgotten.

"I just can't wait for the whole thing to be over," I whisper.

"I know," says Greasy Sae. "But you've got to go through it to get to the end of it. Better not be late."

A light snow starts to fall as I make my way to the Victor's Village. It's about a half-mile walk from the square in the center of town, but it seems like another world entirely.

It's a separate community built around a beautiful green, dotted with flowering bushes. There are twelve houses, each large enough to hold ten of the one I was raised in. Nine stand empty, as they always have. The three in use belong to Haymitch, Peeta, and me.

The houses inhabited by my family and Peeta give off a warm glow of life. Lit windows, smoke from the chimneys, bunches of brightly colored corn affixed to the front doors as decoration for the upcoming Harvest Festival. However, Haymitch's house, despite the care taken by the groundskeeper, exudes an air of abandonment and neglect. I brace myself at his front door, knowing it will be foul, then push inside.

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<sup>3</sup> Darius – Дарий

My nose immediately wrinkles in disgust. Haymitch refuses to let anyone in to clean and does a poor job himself. Over the years the odors of liquor and vomit, boiled cabbage and burned meat, unwashed clothes and mouse droppings have intermingled into a stench that brings tears to my eyes. I wade through a litter of discarded wrappings, broken glass, and bones to where I know I will find Haymitch. He sits at the kitchen table, his arms sprawled across the wood, his face in a puddle of liquor, snoring his head off.

I nudge his shoulder. "Get up!" I say loudly, because I've learned there's no subtle way to wake him. His snoring stops for a moment, questioningly, and then resumes. I push him harder. "Get up, Haymitch. It's tour day!" I force the window up, inhaling deep breaths of the clean air outside. My feet shift through the garbage on the floor, and I unearth a tin coffeepot and fill it at the sink. The stove isn't completely out and I manage to coax the few live coals into a flame. I pour some ground coffee into the pot, enough to make sure the resulting brew will be good and strong, and set it on the stove to boil.

Haymitch is still dead to the world. Since nothing else has worked, I fill a basin with icy cold water, dump it on his head, and spring out of the way. A guttural animal sound comes from his throat. He jumps up, kicking his chair ten feet behind him and wielding a knife. I forgot he always sleeps with one clutched in his hand. I should have pried it from his fingers, but I've had a lot on my mind. Spewing profanity, he slashes the air a few moments before coming to his senses. He wipes his face on his shirtsleeve and turns to the windowsill where I perch, just in case I need to make a quick exit.

"What are you doing?" he sputters.

"You told me to wake you an hour before the cameras come," I say.

"What?" he says.

"Your idea," I insist.

He seems to remember. "Why am I all wet?"

"I couldn't shake you awake," I say. "Look, if you wanted to be babied, you should have asked Peeta."

"Asked me what?" Just the sound of his voice twists my stomach into a knot of unpleasant emotions like guilt, sadness, and fear. And longing. I might as well admit there's some of that, too. Only it has too much competition to ever win out.

I watch as Peeta crosses to the table, the sunlight from the window picking up the glint of fresh snow in his blond hair. He looks strong and healthy, so different from the sick, starving boy I knew in the arena, and you can barely even notice his limp now. He sets a loaf of fresh-baked bread on the table and holds out his hand to Haymitch.

"Asked you to wake me without giving me pneumonia," says Haymitch, passing over his knife. He pulls off his filthy shirt, revealing an equally soiled undershirt, and rubs himself down with the dry part.

Peeta smiles and douses Haymitch's knife in white liquor from a bottle on the floor. He wipes the blade clean on his shirttail and slices the bread. Peeta keeps all of us in fresh baked goods. I hunt. He bakes. Haymitch drinks. We have our own ways to stay busy, to keep thoughts of our time as contestants in the Hunger Games at bay. It's not until he's handed Haymitch the heel that he even looks at me for the first time. "Would you like a piece?"

"No, I ate at the Hob," I say. "But thank you." My voice doesn't sound like my own, it's so formal. Just as it's been every time I've spoken to Peeta since the cameras finished filming our happy homecoming and we returned to our real lives.

"You're welcome," he says back stiffly.

Haymitch tosses his shirt somewhere into the mess. "Brrr. You two have got a lot of warming up to do before showtime."

He's right, of course. The audience will be expecting the pair of lovebirds who won the Hunger Games. Not two people who can barely look each other in the eye. But all I say is, "Take a bath, Haymitch." Then I swing out the window, drop to the ground, and head across the green to my house.

The snow has begun to stick and I leave a trail of footprints behind me. At the front door, I pause to knock the wet stuff from my shoes before I go in. My mother's been working day and night to make everything perfect for the cameras, so it's no time to be tracking up her shiny floors. I've barely stepped inside when she's there, holding my arm as if to stop me.

"Don't worry, I'm taking them off here," I say, leaving my shoes on the mat.

My mother gives an odd, breathy laugh and removes the game bag loaded with supplies from my shoulder. "It's just snow. Did you have a nice walk?"

"Walk?" She knows I've been in the woods half the night. Then I see the man standing behind her in the kitchen doorway. One look at his tailored suit and surgically perfected features and I know he's from the Capitol. Something is wrong. "It was more like skating. It's really getting slippery out there."

"Someone's here to see you," says my mother. Her face is too pale and I can hear the anxiety she's trying to hide.

"I thought they weren't due until noon." I pretend not to notice her state. "Did Cinna come early to help me get ready?"

"No, Katniss, it's—" my mother begins.

"This way, please, Miss Everdeen," says the man. He gestures down the hallway. It's weird to be ushered around your own home, but I know better than to comment on it.

As I go, I give my mother a reassuring smile over my shoulder. "Probably more instructions for the tour." They've been sending me all kinds of stuff about my itinerary and what protocol will be observed in each district. But as I walk toward the door of the study, a door I have never even seen closed until this moment, I can feel my mind begin to race. *Who is here? What do they want? Why is my mother so pale?*

"Go right in," says the Capitol man, who has followed me down the hallway.

I twist the polished brass knob and step inside. My nose registers the conflicting scents of roses and blood. A small, white-haired man who seems vaguely familiar is reading a book. He holds up a finger as if to say, "Give me a moment." Then he turns and my heart skips a beat.

I'm staring into the snakelike eyes of President Snow.

## 2

In my mind, President Snow should be viewed in front of marble pillars hung with oversized flags. It's jarring to see him surrounded by the ordinary objects in the room. Like taking the lid off a pot and finding a fanged viper instead of stew.

What could he be doing here? My mind rushes back to the opening days of other Victory Tours. I remember seeing the winning tributes with their mentors and stylists. Even some high government officials have made appearances occasionally. But I have never seen President Snow. He attends celebrations in the Capitol. Period.

If he's made the journey all the way from his city, it can only mean one thing. I'm in serious trouble. And if I am, so is my family. A shiver goes through me when I think of the proximity of my mother and sister to this man who despises me. Will always despise me. Because I outsmarted his sadistic Hunger Games, made the Capitol look foolish, and consequently undermined his control.

All I was doing was trying to keep Peeta and myself alive. Any act of rebellion was purely coincidental. But when the Capitol decrees that only one tribute can live and you have the audacity to challenge it, I guess that's a rebellion in itself. My only defense was pretending that I was driven insane by a passionate love for Peeta. So we were both allowed to live. To be crowned victors. To go home and celebrate and wave good-bye to the cameras and be left alone. Until now.

Perhaps it is the newness of the house or the shock of seeing him or the mutual understanding that he could have me killed in a second that makes me feel like the intruder. As if this is his home and I'm the uninvited party. So I don't welcome him or offer him a chair. I don't say anything. In fact, I treat him as if he's a real snake, the venomous kind. I stand motionless, my eyes locked on him, considering plans of retreat.

"I think we'll make this whole situation a lot simpler by agreeing not to lie to each other," he says. "What do you think?"

I think my tongue has frozen and speech will be impossible, so I surprise myself by answering back in a steady voice, "Yes, I think that would save time."

President Snow smiles and I notice his lips for the first time. I'm expecting snake lips, which is to say none. But his are overly full, the skin stretched too tight. I have to wonder if his mouth has been altered to make him more appealing. If so, it was a waste of time and money, because he's not appealing at all. "My advisors were concerned you would be difficult, but you're not planning on being difficult, are you?" he asks.

"No," I answer.

"That's what I told them. I said any girl who goes to such lengths to preserve her life isn't going to be interested in throwing it away with both hands. And then there's her family to think of. Her mother, her sister, and all those ... cousins." By the way he lingers on the word "cousins," I can tell he knows that Gale and I don't share a family tree.

Well, it's all on the table now. Maybe that's better. I don't do well with ambiguous threats. I'd much rather know the score.

"Let's sit." President Snow takes a seat at the large desk of polished wood where Prim does her homework and my mother her budgets. Like our home, this is a place that he has no right, but ultimately every right, to occupy. I sit in front of the desk on one of the carved, straight-backed chairs. It's made for someone taller than I am, so only my toes rest on the ground.

"I have a problem, Miss Everdeen," says President Snow. "A problem that began the moment you pulled out those poisonous berries in the arena."

That was the moment when I guessed that if the Gamemakers had to choose between watching Peeta and me commit suicide—which would mean having no victor—and letting us both live, they would take the latter.

“If the Head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane, had had any brains, he’d have blown you to dust right then. But he had an unfortunate sentimental streak. So here you are. Can you guess where he is?” he asks.

I nod because, by the way he says it, it’s clear that Seneca Crane has been executed. The smell of roses and blood has grown stronger now that only a desk separates us. There’s a rose in President Snow’s lapel, which at least suggests a source of the flower perfume, but it must be genetically enhanced, because no real rose reeks like that. As for the blood ... I don’t know.

“After that, there was nothing to do but let you play out your little scenario. And you were pretty good, too, with the love-crazed schoolgirl bit. The people in the Capitol were quite convinced. Unfortunately, not everyone in the districts fell for your act,” he says.

My face must register at least a flicker of bewilderment, because he addresses it.

“This, of course, you don’t know. You have no access to information about the mood in other districts. In several of them, however, people viewed your little trick with the berries as an act of defiance, not an act of love. And if a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop them from doing the same?” he says. “What is to prevent, say, an uprising?”

It takes a moment for his last sentence to sink in. Then the full weight of it hits me. “There have been uprisings?” I ask, both chilled and somewhat elated by the possibility.

“Not yet. But they’ll follow if the course of things doesn’t change. And uprisings have been known to lead to revolution.” President Snow rubs a spot over his left eyebrow, the very spot where I myself get headaches. “Do you have any idea what that would mean? How many people would die? What conditions those left would have to face? Whatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse.”

I’m taken aback by the directness and even the sincerity of this speech. As if his primary concern is the welfare of the citizens of Panem, when nothing could be further from the truth. I don’t know how I dare to say the next words, but I do. “It must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down.”

There’s a long pause while he examines me. Then he simply says, “It is fragile, but not in the way that you suppose.”

There’s a knock at the door, and the Capitol man sticks his head in. “Her mother wants to know if you want tea.”

“I would. I would like tea,” says the president. The door opens wider, and there stands my mother, holding a tray with a china tea set she brought to the Seam when she married. “Set it here, please.” He places his book on the corner of the desk and pats the center.

My mother sets the tray on the desk. It holds a china teapot and cups, cream and sugar, and a plate of cookies. They are beautifully iced with softly colored flowers. The frosting work can only be Peeta’s.

“What a welcome sight. You know, it’s funny how often people forget that presidents need to eat, too,” President Snow says charmingly. Well, it seems to relax my mother a bit, anyway.

“Can I get you anything else? I can cook something more substantial if you’re hungry,” she offers.

“No, this could not be more perfect. Thank you,” he says, clearly dismissing her. My mother nods, shoots me a glance, and goes. President Snow pours tea for both of us and fills his with cream and sugar, then takes a long time stirring. I sense he has had his say and is waiting for me to respond.

“I didn’t mean to start any uprisings,” I tell him.

“I believe you. It doesn’t matter. Your stylist turned out to be prophetic in his wardrobe choice. Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem,” he says.

“Why don’t you just kill me now?” I blurt out.

“Publicly?” he asks. “That would only add fuel to the flames.”

“Arrange an accident, then,” I say.

“Who would buy it?” he asks. “Not you, if you were watching.”

“Then just tell me what you want me to do. I’ll do it,” I say.

“If only it were that simple.” He picks up one of the flowered cookies and examines it. “Lovely. Your mother made these?”

“Peeta.” And for the first time, I find I can’t hold his gaze. I reach for my tea but set it back down when I hear the cup rattling against the saucer. To cover I quickly take a cookie.

“Peeta. How is the love of your life?” he asks. “Good,” I say.

“At what point did he realize the exact degree of your indifference?” he asks, dipping his cookie in his tea. “I’m not indifferent,” I say.

“But perhaps not as taken with the young man as you would have the country believe,” he says. “Who says I’m not?” I say.

“I do,” says the president. “And I wouldn’t be here if I were the only person who had doubts. How’s the handsome cousin?”

“I don’t know ... I don’t ...” My revulsion at this conversation, at discussing my feelings for two of the people I care most about with President Snow, chokes me off.

“Speak, Miss Everdeen. Him I can easily kill off if we don’t come to a happy resolution,” he says. “You aren’t doing him a favor by disappearing into the woods with him each Sunday.”

If he knows this, what else does he know? And how does he know it? Many people could tell him that Gale and I spend our Sundays hunting. Don’t we show up at the end of each one loaded down with game? Haven’t we for years? The real question is what he thinks goes on in the woods beyond District 12. Surely they haven’t been tracking us in there. Or have they? Could we have been followed? That seems impossible. At least by a person. Cameras? That never crossed my mind until this moment. The woods have always been our place of safety, our place beyond the reach of the Capitol, where we’re free to say what we feel, be who we are. At least before the Games. If we’ve been watched since, what have they seen? Two people hunting, saying treasonous things against the Capitol, yes. But not two people in love, which seems to be President Snow’s implication. We are safe on that charge. Unless ... unless ...

It only happened once. It was fast and unexpected, but it did happen.

After Peeta and I got home from the Games, it was several weeks before I saw Gale alone. First there were the obligatory celebrations. A banquet for the victors that only the most high-ranking people were invited to. A holiday for the whole district with free food and entertainers brought in from the Capitol. Parcel Day, the first of twelve, in which food packages were delivered to every person in the district. That was my favorite. To see all those hungry kids in the Seam running around, waving cans of applesauce, tins of meat, even candy. Back home, too big to carry, would be bags of grain, cans of oil. To know that once a month for a year they would all receive another parcel. That was one of the few times I actually felt good about winning the Games.

So between the ceremonies and events and the reporters documenting my every move as I presided and thanked and kissed Peeta for the audience, I had no privacy at all. After a few weeks, things finally died down. The camera crews and reporters packed up and went home. Peeta and I assumed the cool relationship we’ve had ever since. My family settled into our house in the Victor’s Village. The everyday life of District 12—workers to the mines, kids to school—resumed its usual pace. I waited until I thought the coast was really clear, and then one Sunday, without telling anyone, I got up hours before dawn and took off for the woods.

The weather was still warm enough that I didn’t need a jacket. I packed along a bag filled with special foods, cold chicken and cheese and bakery bread and oranges. Down at my old house, I put on my hunting boots. As usual, the fence was not charged and it was simple to slip into the woods

and retrieve my bow and arrows. I went to our place, Gale's and mine, where we had shared breakfast the morning of the reaping that sent me into the Games.

I waited at least two hours. I'd begun to think that he'd given up on me in the weeks that had passed. Or that he no longer cared about me. Hated me even. And the idea of losing him forever, my best friend, the only person I'd ever trusted with my secrets, was so painful I couldn't stand it. Not on top of everything else that had happened. I could feel my eyes tearing up and my throat starting to close the way it does when I get upset.

Then I looked up and there he was, ten feet away, just watching me. Without even thinking, I jumped up and threw my arms around him, making some weird sound that combined laughing, choking, and crying. He was holding me so tightly that I couldn't see his face, but it was a really long time before he let me go and then he didn't have much choice, because I'd gotten this unbelievably loud case of the hiccups and had to get a drink.

We did what we always did that day. Ate breakfast. Hunted and fished and gathered. Talked about people in town. But not about us, his new life in the mines, my time in the arena. Just about other things. By the time we were at the hole in the fence that's nearest the Hob, I think I really believed that things could be the same. That we could go on as we always had. I'd given all the game to Gale to trade since we had so much food now. I told him I'd skip the Hob, even though I was looking forward to going there, because my mother and sister didn't even know I'd gone hunting and they'd be wondering where I was. Then suddenly, as I was suggesting I take over the daily snare run, he took my face in his hands and kissed me.

I was completely unprepared. You would think that after all the hours I'd spent with Gale—watching him talk and laugh and frown—that I would know all there was to know about his lips. But I hadn't imagined how warm they would feel pressed against my own. Or how those hands, which could set the most intricate of snares, could as easily entrap me. I think I made some sort of noise in the back of my throat, and I vaguely remember my fingers, curled tightly closed, resting on his chest. Then he let go and said, "I had to do that. At least once." And he was gone.

Despite the fact that the sun was setting and my family would be worried, I sat by a tree next to the fence. I tried to decide how I felt about the kiss, if I had liked it or resented it, but all I really remembered was the pressure of Gale's lips and the scent of the oranges that still lingered on his skin. It was pointless comparing it with the many kisses I'd exchanged with Peeta. I still hadn't figured out if any of those counted. Finally I went home.

That week I managed the snares and dropped off the meat with Hazelle. But I didn't see Gale until Sunday. I had this whole speech worked out, about how I didn't want a boyfriend and never planned on marrying, but I didn't end up using it. Gale acted as if the kiss had never happened.

Maybe he was waiting for me to say something. Or kiss him back. Instead I just pretended it had never happened, either. But it had. Gale had shattered some invisible barrier between us and, with it, any hope I had of resuming our old, uncomplicated friendship. Whatever I pretended, I could never look at his lips in quite the same way.

This all flashes through my head in an instant as President Snow's eyes bore into me on the heels of his threat to kill Gale. How stupid I've been to think the Capitol would just ignore me once I'd returned home! Maybe I didn't know about the potential uprisings. But I knew they were angry with me. Instead of acting with the extreme caution the situation called for, what have I done? From the president's point of view, I've ignored Peeta and flaunted my preference for Gale's company before the whole district. And by doing so made it clear I was, in fact, mocking the Capitol. Now I've endangered Gale and his family and my family and Peeta, too, by my carelessness.

"Please don't hurt Gale," I whisper. "He's just my friend. He's been my friend for years. That's all that's between us. Besides, everyone thinks we're cousins now."

"I'm only interested in how it affects your dynamic with Peeta, thereby affecting the mood in the districts," he says.

“It will be the same on the tour. I’ll be in love with him just as I was,” I say.

“Just as you are,” corrects President Snow.

“Just as I am,” I confirm.

“Only you’ll have to do even better if the uprisings are to be averted,” he says. “This tour will be your only chance to turn things around.”

“I know. I will. I’ll convince everyone in the districts that I wasn’t defying the Capitol, that I was crazy with love,” I say.

President Snow rises and dabs his puffy lips with a napkin. “Aim higher in case you fall short.”

“What do you mean? How can I aim higher?” I ask.

“Convince *me*” he says. He drops the napkin and retrieves his book. I don’t watch him as he heads for the door, so I flinch when he whispers in my ear. “By the way, I know about the kiss.” Then the door clicks shut behind him.



### 3

The smell of blood ... it was on his breath.

*What does he do?* I think. *Drink it?* I imagine him sipping it from a teacup. Dipping a cookie into the stuff and pulling it out dripping red.

Outside the window, a car comes to life, soft and quiet like the purr of a cat, then fades away into the distance. It slips off as it arrived, unnoticed.

The room seems to be spinning in slow, lopsided circles, and I wonder if I might black out. I lean forward and clutch the desk with one hand. The other still holds Peeta's beautiful cookie. I think it had a tiger lily on it, but now it's been reduced to crumbs in my fist. I didn't even know I was crushing it, but I guess I had to hold on to something while my world veered out of control.

A visit from President Snow. Districts on the verge of uprisings. A direct death threat to Gale, with others to follow. Everyone I love doomed. And who knows who else will pay for my actions? Unless I turn things around on this tour. Quiet the discontent and put the president's mind at rest. And how? By proving to the country beyond any shadow of a doubt that I love Peeta Mellark.

*I can't do it, I think. I'm not that good.* Peeta's the good one, the likable one. He can make people believe anything. I'm the one who shuts up and sits back and lets him do as much of the talking as possible. But it isn't Peeta who has to prove his devotion. It's me.

I hear my mother's light, quick tread in the hall. *She can't know, I think. Not about any of this.* I reach my hands over the tray and quickly brush the bits of cookie from my palm and fingers. I take a shaky sip of my tea.

"Is everything all right, Katniss?" she asks.

"It's fine. We never see it on television, but the president always visits the victors before the tour to wish them luck," I say brightly.

My mother's face floods with relief. "Oh. I thought there was some kind of trouble."

"No, not at all," I say. "The trouble will start when my prep team sees how I've let my eyebrows grow back in." My mother laughs, and I think about how there was no going back after I took over caring for the family when I was eleven. How I will always have to protect her.

"Why don't I start your bath?" she asks.

"Great," I say, and I can see how pleased she is by my response.

Since I've been home I've been trying hard to mend my relationship with my mother. Asking her to do things for me instead of brushing aside any offer of help, as I did for years out of anger. Letting her handle all the money I won. Returning her hugs instead of tolerating them. My time in the arena made me realize how I needed to stop punishing her for something she couldn't help, specifically the crushing depression she fell into after my father's death. Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them.

Like me, for instance. Right now.

Besides, there's one wonderful thing she did when I arrived back in the district. After our families and friends had greeted Peeta and me at the train station, there were a few questions allowed from reporters. Someone asked my mother what she thought of my new boyfriend, and she replied that, while Peeta was the very model of what a young man should be, I wasn't old enough to have any boyfriend at all. She followed this with a pointed look at Peeta. There was a lot of laughter and comments like "Somebody's in trouble" from the press, and Peeta dropped my hand and sidestepped away from me. That didn't last long—there was too much pressure to act otherwise—but it gave us an excuse to be a little more reserved than we'd been in the Capitol. And maybe it can help account for how little I've been seen in Peeta's company since the cameras left.

I go upstairs to the bathroom, where a steaming tub awaits. My mother has added a small bag of dried flowers that perfumes the air. None of us are used to the luxury of turning on a tap and

having a limitless supply of hot water at our fingertips. We had only cold at our home in the Seam, and a bath meant boiling the rest over the fire. I undress and lower myself into the silky water—my mother has poured in some kind of oil as well—and try to get a grip on things.

The first question is who to tell, if anyone. Not my mother or Prim, obviously; they'd only become sick with worry. Not Gale. Even if I could get word to him. What would he do with the information, anyway? If he were alone, I might try to persuade him to run away. Certainly he could survive in the woods. But he's not alone and he'd never leave his family. Or me. When I get home I'll have to tell him something about why our Sundays are a thing of the past, but I can't think about that now. Only about my next move. Besides, Gale's already so angry and frustrated with the Capitol that I sometimes think he's going to arrange his own uprising. The last thing he needs is an incentive. No, I can't tell anyone I'm leaving behind in District 12.

There are still three people I might confide in, starting with Cinna, my stylist. But my guess is Cinna might already be at risk, and I don't want to pull him into any more trouble by closer association with me. Then there's Peeta, who will be my partner in this deception, but how do I begin that conversation? *Hey, Peeta, remember how I told you I was kind of faking being in love with you? Well, I really need you to forget about that now and act extra in love with me or the president might kill Gale.* I can't do it. Besides, Peeta will perform well whether he knows what's at stake or not. That leaves Haymitch. Drunken, cranky, confrontational Haymitch, who I just poured a basin of ice water on. As my mentor in the Games it was his duty to keep me alive. I only hope he's still up for the job.

I slide down into the water, letting it block out the sounds around me. I wish the tub would expand so I could go swimming, like I used to on hot summer Sundays in the woods with my father. Those days were a special treat. We would leave early in the morning and hike farther into the woods than usual to a small lake he'd found while hunting. I don't even remember learning to swim, I was so young when he taught me. I just remember diving, turning somersaults, and paddling around. The muddy bottom of the lake beneath my toes. The smell of blossoms and greenery. Floating on my back, as I am now, staring at the blue sky while the chatter of the woods was muted by the water. He'd bag the waterfowl that nested around the shore, I'd hunt for eggs in the grasses, and we'd both dig for katniss roots, the plant for which he named me, in the shallows. At night, when we got home, my mother would pretend not to recognize me because I was so clean. Then she'd cook up an amazing dinner of roasted duck and baked katniss tubers with gravy.

I never took Gale to the lake. I could have. It's time-consuming to get there, but the waterfowl are such easy pickings you can make up for lost hunting time. It's a place I've never really wanted to share with anyone, though, a place that belonged only to my father and me. Since the Games, when I've had little to occupy my days, I've gone there a couple of times. The swimming was still nice, but mostly the visits depressed me. Over the course of the last five years, the lake's remarkably unchanged and I'm almost unrecognizable.

Even underwater I can hear the sounds of commotion. Honking car horns, shouts of greeting, doors banging shut. It can only mean my entourage has arrived. I just have time to towel off and slip into a robe before my prep team bursts into the bathroom. There's no question of privacy. When it comes to my body, we have no secrets, these three people and me.

"Katniss, your eyebrows!" Venia shrieks right off, and even with the black cloud hanging over me, I have to stifle a laugh. Her aqua hair has been styled so it sticks out in sharp points all over her head, and the gold tattoos that used to be confined above her brows have curled around under her eyes, all contributing to the impression that I've literally shocked her.

Octavia comes up and pats Venia's back soothingly, her curvy body looking plumper than usual next to Venia's thin, angular one. "There, there. You can fix those in no time. But what am I going to do with these nails?" She grabs my hand and pins it flat between her two pea green ones. No, her skin isn't exactly pea green now. It's more of a light evergreen. The shift in shade is no doubt an attempt

to stay abreast of the capricious fashion trends of the Capitol. “Really, Katniss, you could have left me something to work with!” she wails.

It’s true. I’ve bitten my nails to stubs in the past couple of months. I thought about trying to break the habit but couldn’t think of a good reason I should. “Sorry,” I mutter. I hadn’t really been spending much time worrying about how it might affect my prep team.

Flavius lifts a few strands of my wet, tangled hair. He gives his head a disapproving shake, causing his orange corkscrew curls to bounce around. “Has anyone touched this since you last saw us?” he asks sternly. “Remember, we specifically asked you to leave your hair alone.”

“Yes!” I say, grateful that I can show I haven’t totally taken them for granted. “I mean, no, no one’s cut it. I did remember that.” No, I didn’t. It’s more like the issue never came up. Since I’ve been home, all I’ve done is stick it in its usual old braid down my back.

This seems to mollify them, and they all kiss me, set me on a chair in my bedroom, and, as usual, start talking nonstop without bothering to notice if I’m listening. While Venia reinvents my eyebrows and Octavia gives me fake nails and Flavius massages goo into my hair, I hear all about the Capitol. What a hit the Games were, how dull things have been since, how no one can wait until Peeta and I visit again at the end of the Victory Tour. After that, it won’t be long before the Capitol begins gearing up for the **Quarter Quell**<sup>4</sup>.

“Isn’t it thrilling?”

“Don’t you feel so lucky?”

“In your very first year of being a victor, you get to be a mentor in a Quarter Quell!”

Their words overlap in a blur of excitement.

“Oh, yes,” I say neutrally. It’s the best I can do. In a normal year, being a mentor to the tributes is the stuff of nightmares. I can’t walk by the school now without wondering what kid I’ll have to coach. But to make things even worse, this is the year of the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games, and that means it’s also a Quarter Quell. They occur every twenty-five years, marking the anniversary of the districts’ defeat with over-the-top celebrations and, for extra fun, some miserable twist for the tributes. I’ve never been alive for one, of course. But in school I remember hearing that for the second Quarter Quell, the Capitol demanded that twice the number of tributes be provided for the arena. The teachers didn’t go into much more detail, which is surprising, because that was the year District 12’s very own Haymitch Abernathy won the crown.

“Haymitch better be preparing himself for a lot of attention!” squeals Octavia.

Haymitch has never mentioned his personal experience in the arena to me. I would never ask. And if I ever saw his Games televised in reruns, I must’ve been too young to remember it. But the Capitol won’t let him forget it this year. In a way, it’s a good thing Peeta and I will both be available as mentors during the Quell, because it’s a sure bet that Haymitch will be wasted.

After they’ve exhausted the topic of the Quarter Quell, my prep team launches into a whole lot of stuff about their incomprehensibly silly lives. Who said what about someone I’ve never heard of and what sort of shoes they just bought and a long story from Octavia about what a mistake it was to have everyone wear feathers to her birthday party.

Soon my brows are stinging, my hair’s smooth and silky, and my nails are ready to be painted. Apparently they’ve been given instruction to prepare only my hands and face, probably because everything else will be covered in the cold weather. Flavius badly wants to use his own trademark purple lipstick on me but resigns himself to a pink as they begin to color my face and nails. I can see by the palette Cinna has assigned that we’re going for girlish, not sexy.

Good. I’ll never convince anyone of anything if I’m trying to be provocative. Haymitch made that very clear when he was coaching me for my interview for the Games.

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<sup>4</sup> **Quarter Quell** – Квартальная бойня

My mother comes in, somewhat shyly, and says that Cinna has asked her to show the preps how she did my hair the day of the reaping. They respond with enthusiasm and then watch, thoroughly engrossed, as she breaks down the process of the elaborate braided hairdo. In the mirror, I can see their earnest faces following her every move, their eagerness when it is their turn to try a step. In fact, all three are so readily respectful and nice to my mother that I feel bad about how I go around feeling so superior to them. Who knows who I would be or what I would talk about if I'd been raised in the Capitol? Maybe my biggest regret would be having feathered costumes at my birthday party, too.

When my hair is done, I find Cinna downstairs in the living room, and just the sight of him makes me feel more hopeful. He looks the same as always, simple clothes, short brown hair, just a hint of gold eyeliner. We embrace, and I can barely keep from spilling out the entire episode with President Snow. But no, I've decided to tell Haymitch first. He'll know best who to burden with it. It's so easy to talk to Cinna, though. Lately we've been speaking a lot on the telephone that came with the house. It's sort of a joke, because almost no one else we know owns one. There's Peeta, but obviously I don't call him. Haymitch tore his out of the wall years ago. My friend Madge, the mayor's daughter, has a telephone in her house, but if we want to talk, we do it in person. At first, the thing barely ever got used. Then Cinna started to call to work on my talent.

Every victor is supposed to have one. Your talent is the activity you take up since you don't have to work either in school or your district's industry. It can be anything, really, anything that they can interview you about. Peeta, it turns out, actually has a talent, which is painting. He's been frosting those cakes and cookies for years in his family's bakery. But now that he's rich, he can afford to smear real paint on canvases. I don't have a talent, unless you count hunting illegally, which they don't. Or maybe singing, which I wouldn't do for the Capitol in a million years. My mother tried to interest me in a variety of suitable alternatives from a list Effie Trinket sent her. Cooking, flower arranging, playing the flute. None of them took, although Prim had a knack for all three. Finally Cinna stepped in and offered to help me develop my passion for designing clothes, which really required development since it was nonexistent. But I said yes because it meant getting to talk to Cinna, and he promised he'd do all the work.

Now he's arranging things around my living room: clothing, fabrics, and sketchbooks with designs he's drawn. I pick up one of the sketchbooks and examine a dress I supposedly created. "You know, I think I show a lot of promise," I say.

"Get dressed, you worthless thing," he says, tossing a bundle of clothes at me.

I may have no interest in designing clothes but I do love the ones Cinna makes for me. Like these. Flowing black pants made of a thick, warm material. A comfortable white shirt. A sweater woven from green and blue and gray strands of kitten-soft wool. Laced leather boots that don't pinch my toes.

"Did I design my outfit?" I ask.

"No, you aspire to design your outfit and be like me, your fashion hero," says Cinna. He hands me a small stack of cards. "You'll read these off camera while they're filming the clothes. Try to sound like you care."

Just then, Effie Trinket arrives in a pumpkin orange wig to remind everyone, "We're on a schedule!" She kisses me on both cheeks while waving in the camera crew, then orders me into position. Effie's the only reason we got anywhere on time in the Capitol, so I try to accommodate her. I start bobbing around like a puppet, holding up outfits and saying meaningless things like "Don't you love it?" The sound team records me reading from my cards in a chirpy voice so they can insert it later, then I'm tossed out of the room so they can film my/Cinna's designs in peace.

Prim got out early from school for the event. Now she stands in the kitchen, being interviewed by another crew. She looks lovely in a sky blue frock that brings out her eyes, her blond hair pulled back in a matching ribbon. She's leaning a bit forward on the toes of her shiny white boots like she's about to take flight, like—

*Bam!* It's like someone actually hits me in the chest. No one has, of course, but the pain is so real I take a step back. I squeeze my eyes shut and I don't see Prim—I see Rue, the twelve-year-old girl from District 11 who was my ally in the arena. She could fly, birdlike, from tree to tree, catching on to the slenderest branches. Rue, who I didn't save. Who I let die. I picture her lying on the ground with the spear still wedged in her stomach ...

Who else will I fail to save from the Capitol's vengeance? Who else will be dead if I don't satisfy President Snow?

I realize Cinna's trying to put a coat on me, so I raise my arms. I feel fur, inside and out, encasing me. It's from no animal I've ever seen. "Ermine," he tells me as I stroke the white sleeve. Leather gloves. A bright red scarf. Something furry covers my ears. "You're bringing earmuffs back in style."

*I hate earmuffs*, I think. They make it hard to hear, and since I was blasted deaf in one ear in the arena, I dislike them even more. After I won, the Capitol repaired my ear, but I still find myself testing it.

My mother hurries up with something cupped in her hand. "For good luck," she says.

It's the pin Madge gave me before I left for the Games. A mockingjay flying in a circle of gold. I tried to give it to Rue but she wouldn't take it. She said the pin was the reason she'd decided to trust me. Cinna fixes it on the knot in the scarf.

Effie Trinket's nearby, clapping her hands. "Attention, everyone! We're about to do the first outdoor shot, where the victors greet each other at the beginning of their marvelous trip. All right, Katniss, big smile, you're very excited, right?" I don't exaggerate when I say she shoves me out the door.

For a moment I can't quite see right because of the snow, which is now coming down in earnest. Then I make out Peeta coming through his front door. In my head I hear President Snow's directive, "*Convince me.*" And I know I must.

My face breaks into a huge smile and I start walking in Peeta's direction. Then, as if I can't stand it another second, I start running. He catches me and spins me around and then he slips—he still isn't entirely in command of his artificial leg—and we fall into the snow, me on top of him, and that's where we have our first kiss in months. It's full of fur and snowflakes and lipstick, but underneath all that, I can feel the steadiness that Peeta brings to everything. And I know I'm not alone. As badly as I have hurt him, he won't expose me in front of the cameras. Won't condemn me with a halfhearted kiss. He's still looking out for me. Just as he did in the arena. Somehow the thought makes me want to cry. Instead I pull him to his feet, tuck my glove through the crook of his arm, and merrily pull him on our way.

The rest of the day is a blur of getting to the station, bidding everyone good-bye, the train pulling out, the old team—Peeta and me, Effie and Haymitch, Cinna and Portia, Peeta's stylist—dining on an indescribably delicious meal I don't remember. And then I'm swathed in pajamas and a voluminous robe, sitting in my plush compartment, waiting for the others to go to sleep. I know Haymitch will be up for hours. He doesn't like to sleep when it's dark out.

When the train seems quiet, I put on my slippers and pad down to his door. I have to knock several times before he answers, scowling, as if he's certain I've brought bad news.

"What do you want?" he says, nearly knocking me out with a cloud of wine fumes.

"I have to talk to you," I whisper.

"Now?" he says. I nod. "This better be good." He waits, but I feel certain every word we utter on a Capitol train is being recorded. "Well?" he barks.

The train starts to brake and for a second I think President Snow is watching me and doesn't approve of my confiding in Haymitch and has decided to go ahead and kill me now. But we're just stopping for fuel.

"The train's so stuffy," I say.

It's a harmless phrase, but I see Haymitch's eyes narrow in understanding. "I know what you need." He pushes past me and lurches down the hall to a door. When he wrestles it open, a blast of snow hits us. He trips out onto the ground.

A Capitol attendant rushes to help, but Haymitch waves her away good-naturedly as he staggers off. "Just want some fresh air. Only be a minute."

"Sorry. He's drunk," I say apologetically. "I'll get him." I hop down and stumble along the track behind him, soaking my slippers with snow, as he leads me beyond the end of the train so we will not be overheard. Then he turns on me.

"What?"

I tell him everything. About the president's visit, about Gale, about how we're all going to die if I fail.

His face sobers, grows older in the glow of the red tail-lights. "Then you can't fail."

"If you could just help me get through this trip—" I begin.

"No, Katniss, it's not just this trip," he says. "What do you mean?" I say.

"Even if you pull it off, they'll be back in another few months to take us all to the Games. You and Peeta, you'll be mentors now, every year from here on out. And every year they'll revisit the romance and broadcast the details of your private life, and you'll never, ever be able to do anything but live happily ever after with that boy."

The full impact of what he's saying hits me. I will never have a life with Gale, even if I want to. I will never be allowed to live alone. I will have to be forever in love with Peeta. The Capitol will insist on it. I'll have a few years maybe, because I'm still only sixteen, to stay with my mother and Prim. And then ... and then ...

"Do you understand what I mean?" he presses me.

I nod. He means there's only one future, if I want to keep those I love alive and stay alive myself. I'll have to marry Peeta.

## 4

We slog back to the train in silence. In the hallway outside my door, Haymitch gives my shoulder a pat and says, “You could do a lot worse, you know.” He heads off to his compartment, taking the smell of wine with him.

In my room, I remove my sodden slippers, my wet robe and pajamas. There are more in the drawers but I just crawl between the covers of my bed in my underclothes. I stare into the darkness, thinking about my conversation with Haymitch. Everything he said was true about the Capitol’s expectations, my future with Peeta, even his last comment. Of course, I could do a lot worse than Peeta. That isn’t really the point, though, is it? One of the few freedoms we have in District 12 is the right to marry who we want or not marry at all. And now even that has been taken away from me. I wonder if President Snow will insist we have children. If we do, they’ll have to face the reaping each year. And wouldn’t it be something to see the child of not one but two victors chosen for the arena? Victors’ children have been in the ring before. It always causes a lot of excitement and generates talk about how the odds are not in that family’s favor. But it happens too frequently to just be about odds. Gale’s convinced the Capitol does it on purpose, rigs the drawings to add extra drama. Given all the trouble I’ve caused, I’ve probably guaranteed any child of mine a spot in the Games.

I think of Haymitch, unmarried, no family, blotting out the world with drink. He could have had his choice of any woman in the district. And he chose solitude. Not solitude—that sounds too peaceful. More like solitary confinement. Was it because, having been in the arena, he knew it was better than risking the alternative? I had a taste of that alternative when they called Prim’s name on reaping day and I watched her walk to the stage to her death. But as her sister I could take her place, an option forbidden to our mother.

My mind searches frantically for a way out. I can’t let President Snow condemn me to this. Even if it means taking my own life. Before that, though, I’d try to run away. What would they do if I simply vanished? Disappeared into the woods and never came out? Could I even manage to take everyone I love with me, start a new life deep in the wild? Highly unlikely but not impossible.

I shake my head to clear it. This is not the time to be making wild escape plans. I must focus on the Victory Tour. Too many people’s fates depend on my giving a good show.

Dawn comes before sleep does, and there’s Effie rapping on my door. I pull on whatever clothes are at the top of the drawer and drag myself down to the dining car. I don’t see what difference it makes when I get up, since this is a travel day, but then it turns out that yesterday’s makeover was just to get me to the train station. Today I’ll get the works from my prep team.

“Why? It’s too cold for anything to show,” I grumble.

“Not in District Eleven,” says Effie.

District 11. Our first stop. I’d rather start in any other district, since this was Rue’s home. But that’s not how the Victory Tour works. Usually it kicks off in 12 and then goes in descending district order to 1, followed by the Capitol. The victor’s district is skipped and saved for very last. Since 12 puts on the least fabulous celebration—usually just a dinner for the tributes and a victory rally in the square, where nobody looks like they’re having any fun—it’s probably best to get us out of the way as soon as possible. This year, for the first time since Haymitch won, the final stop on the tour will be 12, and the Capitol will spring for the festivities.

I try to enjoy the food like Hazelle said. The kitchen staff clearly wants to please me. They’ve prepared my favorite, lamb stew with dried plums, among other delicacies. Orange juice and a pot of steaming hot chocolate wait at my place at the table. So I eat a lot, and the meal is beyond reproach, but I can’t say I’m enjoying it. I’m also annoyed that no one but Effie and I has shown up.

“Where’s everybody else?” I ask.

“Oh, who knows where Haymitch is,” says Effie. I didn’t really expect Haymitch, because he’s probably just getting to bed. “Cinna was up late working on organizing your garment car. He must have over a hundred outfits for you. Your evening clothes are exquisite. And Peeta’s team is probably still asleep.”

“Doesn’t he need prepping?” I ask.

“Not the way you do,” Effie replies.

What does this mean? It means I get to spend the morning having the hair ripped off my body while Peeta sleeps in. I hadn’t thought about it much, but in the arena at least some of the boys got to keep their body hair whereas none of the girls did. I can remember Peeta’s now, as I bathed him by the stream. Very blond in the sunlight, once the mud and blood had been washed away. Only his face remained completely smooth. Not one of the boys grew a beard, and many were old enough to. I wonder what they did to them.

If I feel ragged, my prep team seems in worse condition, knocking back coffee and sharing brightly colored little pills. As far as I can tell, they never get up before noon unless there’s some sort of national emergency, like my leg hair. I was so happy when it grew back in, too. As if it were a sign that things might be returning to normal. I run my fingers along the soft, curly down on my legs and give myself over to the team. None of them are up to their usual chatter, so I can hear every strand being yanked from its follicle. I have to soak in a tub full of a thick, unpleasant-smelling solution, while my face and hair are plastered with creams. Two more baths follow in other, less offensive, concoctions. I’m plucked and scoured and massaged and anointed until I’m raw.

Flavius tilts up my chin and sighs. “It’s a shame Cinna said no alterations on you.”

“Yes, we could really make you something special,” says Octavia.

“When she’s older,” says Venia almost grimly. “Then he’ll have to let us.”

Do what? Blow my lips up like President Snow’s? Tattoo my breasts? Dye my skin magenta and implant gems in it? Cut decorative patterns in my face? Give me curved talons? Or cat’s whiskers? I saw all these things and more on the people in the Capitol. Do they really have no idea how freakish they look to the rest of us?

The thought of being left to my prep team’s fashion whims only adds to the miseries competing for my attention—my abused body, my lack of sleep, my mandatory marriage, and the terror of being unable to satisfy President Snow’s demands. By the time I reach lunch, where Effie, Cinna, Portia, Haymitch, and Peeta have started without me, I’m too weighed down to talk. They’re raving about the food and how well they sleep on trains. Everyone’s all full of excitement about the tour. Well, everyone but Haymitch. He’s nursing a hangover and picking at a muffin. I’m not really hungry, either, maybe because I loaded up on too much rich stuff this morning or maybe because I’m so unhappy. I play around with a bowl of broth, eating only a spoonful or two. I can’t even look at Peeta—my designated future husband—although I know none of this is his fault.

People notice, try to bring me into the conversation, but I just brush them off. At some point, the train stops. Our server reports it will not just be for a fuel stop—some part has malfunctioned and must be replaced. It will require at least an hour. This sends Effie into a state. She pulls out her schedule and begins to work out how the delay will impact every event for the rest of our lives. Finally I just can’t stand to listen to her anymore.

“No one cares, Effie!” I snap. Everyone at the table stares at me, even Haymitch, who you’d think would be on my side in this matter since Effie drives him nuts. I’m immediately put on the defensive. “Well, no one does!” I say, and get up and leave the dining car.

The train suddenly seems stifling and I’m definitely queasy now. I find the exit door, force it open—triggering some sort of alarm, which I ignore—and jump to the ground, expecting to land in snow. But the air’s warm and balmy against my skin. The trees still wear green leaves. How far south have we come in a day? I walk along the track, squinting against the bright sunlight, already regretting my words to Effie. She’s hardly to blame for my current predicament. I should go back and



apologize. My outburst was the height of bad manners, and manners matter deeply to her. But my feet continue on along the track, past the end of the train, leaving it behind. An hour's delay. I can walk at least twenty minutes in one direction and make it back with plenty of time to spare. Instead, after a couple hundred yards, I sink to the ground and sit there, looking into the distance. If I had a bow and arrows, would I just keep going?

After a while I hear footsteps behind me. It'll be Haymitch, coming to chew me out. It's not like I don't deserve it, but I still don't want to hear it. "I'm not in the mood for a lecture," I warn the clump of weeds by my shoes.

"I'll try to keep it brief." Peeta takes a seat beside me. "I thought you were Haymitch," I say.

"No, he's still working on that muffin." I watch as Peeta positions his artificial leg. "Bad day, huh?" "It's nothing," I say.

He takes a deep breath. "Look, Katniss, I've been wanting to talk to you about the way I acted on the train. I mean, the last train. The one that brought us home. I knew you had something with Gale. I was jealous of him before I even officially met you. And it wasn't fair to hold you to anything that happened in the Games. I'm sorry."

His apology takes me by surprise. It's true that Peeta froze me out after I confessed that my love for him during the Games was something of an act. But I don't hold that against him. In the arena, I'd played that romance angle for all it was worth. There had been times when I didn't honestly know how I felt about him. I still don't, really.

"I'm sorry, too," I say. I'm not sure for what exactly. Maybe because there's a real chance I'm about to destroy him.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about. You were just keeping us alive. But I don't want us to go on like this, ignoring each other in real life and falling into the snow every time there's a camera around. So I thought if I stopped being so, you know, wounded, we could take a shot at just being friends," he says.

All my friends are probably going to end up dead, but refusing Peeta wouldn't keep him safe. "Okay," I say. His offer does make me feel better. Less duplicitous somehow. It would be nice if he'd come to me with this earlier, before I knew that President Snow had other plans and just being friends was not an option for us anymore. But either way, I'm glad we're speaking again.

"So what's wrong?" he asks.

I can't tell him. I pick at the clump of weeds.

"Let's start with something more basic. Isn't it strange that I know you'd risk your life to save mine ... but I don't know what your favorite color is?" he says.

A smile creeps onto my lips. "Green. What's yours?"

"Orange," he says.

"Orange? Like Effie's hair?" I say.

"A bit more muted," he says. "More like ... sunset."

Sunset. I can see it immediately, the rim of the descending sun, the sky streaked with soft shades of orange. Beautiful. I remember the tiger lily cookie and, now that Peeta is talking to me again, it's all I can do not to recount the whole story about President Snow. But I know Haymitch wouldn't want me to. I'd better stick to small talk.

"You know, everyone's always raving about your paintings. I feel bad I haven't seen them," I say.

"Well, I've got a whole train car full." He rises and offers me his hand. "Come on."

It's good to feel his fingers entwined with mine again, not for show but in actual friendship. We walk back to the train hand in hand. At the door, I remember. "I've got to apologize to Effie first."

"Don't be afraid to lay it on thick," Peeta tells me.

So when we go back to the dining car, where the others are still at lunch, I give Effie an apology that I think is overkill but in her mind probably just manages to compensate for my breach of etiquette. To her credit, Effie accepts graciously. She says it's clear I'm under a lot of pressure. And

her comments about the necessity of someone attending to the schedule only last about five minutes. Really, I've gotten off easily.

When Effie finishes, Peeta leads me down a few cars to see his paintings. I don't know what I expected. Larger versions of the flower cookies maybe. But this is something entirely different. Peeta has painted the Games.

Some you wouldn't get right away, if you hadn't been with him in the arena yourself. Water dripping through the cracks in our cave. The dry pond bed. A pair of hands, his own, digging for roots. Others any viewer would recognize. The golden horn called the Cornucopia. Clove arranging the knives inside her jacket. One of the mutts, unmistakably the blond, green-eyed one meant to be Glimmer, snarling as it makes its way toward us. And me. I am everywhere. High up in a tree. Beating a shirt against the stones in the stream. Lying unconscious in a pool of blood. And one I can't place—perhaps this is how I looked when his fever was high—emerging from a silver gray mist that matches my eyes exactly.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I hate them," I say. I can almost smell the blood, the dirt, the unnatural breath of the mutt. "All I do is go around trying to forget the arena and you've brought it, back to life. How do you remember these things so exactly?"

"I see them every night," he says.

I know what he means. Nightmares—which I was no stranger to before the Games—now plague me whenever I sleep. But the old standby, the one of my father being blown to bits in the mines, is rare. Instead I relive versions of what happened in the arena. My worthless attempt to save Rue. Peeta bleeding to death. Glimmer's bloated body disintegrating in my hands. Cato's horrific end with the mutations. These are the most frequent visitors. "Me, too. Does it help? To paint them out?"

"I don't know. I think I'm a little less afraid of going to sleep at night, or I tell myself I am," he says. "But they haven't gone anywhere."

"Maybe they won't. Haymitch's haven't." Haymitch doesn't say so, but I'm sure this is why he doesn't like to sleep in the dark.

"No. But for me, it's better to wake up with a paintbrush than a knife in my hand," he says. "So you really hate them?"

"Yes. But they're extraordinary. Really," I say. And they are. But I don't want to look at them anymore. "Want to see my talent? Cinna did a great job on it."

Peeta laughs. "Later." The train lurches forward, and I can see the land moving past us through the window. "Come on, we're almost to District Eleven. Let's go take a look at it."

We go down to the last car on the train. There are chairs and couches to sit on, but what's wonderful is that the back windows retract into the ceiling so you're riding outside, in the fresh air, and you can see a wide sweep of the landscape. Huge open fields with herds of dairy cattle grazing in them. So unlike our own heavily wooded home.

We slow slightly and I think we might be coming in for another stop, when a fence rises up before us. Towering at least thirty-five feet in the air and topped with wicked coils of barbed wire, it makes ours back in District 12 look childish. My eyes quickly inspect the base, which is lined with enormous metal plates. There would be no burrowing under those, no escaping to hunt. Then I see the watchtowers, placed evenly apart, manned with armed guards, so out of place among the fields of wildflowers around them.

"That's something different," says Peeta.

Rue did give me the impression that the rules in District 11 were more harshly enforced. But I never imagined something like this.

Now the crops begin, stretched out as far as the eye can see. Men, women, and children wearing straw hats to keep off the sun straighten up, turn our way, take a moment to stretch their backs as they watch our train go by. I can see orchards in the distance, and I wonder if that's where Rue would have

worked, collecting the fruit from the slimmest branches at the tops of the trees. Small communities of shacks—by comparison the houses in the Seam are upscale—spring up here and there, but they're all deserted. Every hand must be needed for the harvest.

On and on it goes. I can't believe the size of District 11. "How many people do you think live here?" Peeta asks. I shake my head. In school they refer to it as a large district, that's all. No actual figures on the population. But those kids we see on camera waiting for the reaping each year, they can't be but a sampling of the ones who actually live here. What do they do? Have preliminary drawings? Pick the winners ahead of time and make sure they're in the crowd? How exactly did Rue end up on that stage with nothing but the wind offering to take her place?

I begin to weary of the vastness, the endlessness of this place. When Effie comes to tell us to dress, I don't object.

I go to my compartment and let the prep team do my hair and makeup. Cinna comes in with a pretty orange frock patterned with autumn leaves. I think how much Peeta will like the color.

Effie gets Peeta and me together and goes through the day's program one last time. In some districts the victors ride through the city while the residents cheer. But in 11—maybe because there's not much of a city to begin with, things being so spread out, or maybe because they don't want to waste so many people while the harvest is on—the public appearance is confined to the square. It takes place before their Justice Building, a huge marble structure. Once, it must have been a thing of beauty, but time has taken its toll. Even on television you can see ivy overtaking the crumbling facade, the sag of the roof. The square itself is ringed with run-down storefronts, most of which are abandoned. Wherever the well-to-do live in District 11, it's not here.

Our entire public performance will be staged outside on what Effie refers to as the verandah, the tiled expanse between the front doors and the stairs that's shaded by a roof supported by columns. Peeta and I will be introduced, the mayor of 11 will read a speech in our honor, and we'll respond with a scripted thank-you provided by the Capitol. If a victor had any special allies among the dead tributes, it is considered good form to add a few personal comments as well. I should say something about Rue, and Thresh, too, really, but every time I tried to write it at home, I ended up with a blank paper staring me in the face: It's hard for me to talk about them without getting emotional. Fortunately, Peeta has a little something worked up, and with some slight alterations, it can count for both of us. At the end of the ceremony, we'll be presented with some sort of plaque, and then we can withdraw to the Justice Building, where a special dinner will be served.

As the train is pulling into the District 11 station, Cinna puts the finishing touches on my outfit, switching my orange hairband for one of metallic gold and securing the mockingjay pin I wore in the arena to my dress. There's no welcoming committee on the platform, just a squad of eight Peacekeepers who direct us into the back of an armored truck. Effie sniffs as the door clanks closed behind us. "Really, you'd think we were all criminals," she says.

*Not all of us, Effie. Just me, I think.*

The truck lets us out at the back of the Justice Building. We're hurried inside. I can smell an excellent meal being prepared, but it doesn't block out the odors of mildew and rot. They've left us no time to look around. As we make a beeline for the front entrance, I can hear the anthem beginning outside in the square. Someone clips a microphone on me. Peeta takes my left hand. The mayor's introducing us as the massive doors open with a groan.

"Big smiles!" Effie says, and gives us a nudge. Our feet start moving forward.

*This is it. This is where I have to convince everybody how in love I am with Peeta,* I think. The solemn ceremony is pretty tightly mapped out, so I'm not sure how to do it. It's not a time for kissing, but maybe I can work one in.

There's loud applause, but none of the other responses we got in the Capitol, the cheers and whoops and whistles. We walk across the shaded verandah until the roof runs out and we're standing at the top of a big flight of marble stairs in the glaring sun. As my eyes adjust, I see the buildings

on the square have been hung with banners that help cover up their neglected state. It's packed with people, but again, just a fraction of the number who live here.

As usual, a special platform has been constructed at the bottom of the stage for the families of the dead tributes. On Thresh's side, there's only an old woman with a hunched back and a tall, muscular girl I'm guessing is his sister. On Rue's ... I'm not prepared for Rue's family. Her parents, whose faces are still fresh with sorrow. Her five younger siblings, who resemble her so closely. The slight builds, the luminous brown eyes. They form a flock of small dark birds.

The applause dies out and the mayor gives the speech in our honor. Two little girls come up with tremendous bouquets of flowers. Peeta does his part of the scripted reply and then I find my lips moving to conclude it. Fortunately my mother and Prim have drilled me so I can do it in my sleep.

Peeta had his personal comments written on a card, but he doesn't pull it out. Instead he speaks in his simple, winning style about Thresh and Rue making it to the final eight, about how they both kept me alive—thereby keeping him alive—and about how this is a debt we can never repay. And then he hesitates before adding something that wasn't written on the card. Maybe because he thought Effie might make him remove it. "It can in no way replace your losses, but as a token of our thanks we'd like for each of the tributes' families from District Eleven to receive one month of our winnings every year for the duration of our lives."

The crowd can't help but respond with gasps and murmurs. There is no precedent for what Peeta has done. I don't even know if it's legal. He probably doesn't know, either, so he didn't ask in case it isn't. As for the families, they just stare at us in shock. Their lives were changed forever when Thresh and Rue were lost, but this gift will change them again. A month of tribute winnings can easily provide for a family for a year. As long as we live, they will not hunger.

I look at Peeta and he gives me a sad smile. I hear Haymitch's voice. "*You could do a lot worse.*" At this moment, it's impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift ... it is perfect. So when I rise up on tiptoe to kiss him, it doesn't seem forced at all.

The mayor steps forward and presents us each with a plaque that's so large I have to put down my bouquet to hold it. The ceremony's about to end when I notice one of Rue's sisters staring at me. She must be about nine and is almost an exact replica of Rue, down to the way she stands with her arms slightly extended. Despite the good news about the winnings, she's not happy. In fact, her look is reproachful. Is it because I didn't save Rue?

*No. It's because I still haven't thanked her, I think.*

A wave of shame rushes through me. The girl is right. How can I stand here, passive and mute, leaving all the words to Peeta? If she had won, Rue would never have let my death go unsung. I remember how I took care in the arena to cover her with flowers, to make sure her loss did not go unnoticed. But that gesture will mean nothing if I don't support it now.

"Wait!" I stumble forward, pressing the plaque to my chest. My allotted time for speaking has come and gone, but I must say something. I owe too much. And even if I had pledged all my winnings to the families, it would not excuse my silence today. "Wait, please." I don't know how to start, but once I do, the words rush from my lips as if they've been forming in the back of my mind for a long time.

"I want to give my thanks to the tributes of District Eleven," I say. I look at the pair of women on Thresh's side. "I only ever spoke to Thresh one time. Just long enough for him to spare my life. I didn't know him, but I always respected him. For his power. For his refusal to play the Games on anyone's terms but his own. The Careers wanted him to team up with them from the beginning, but he wouldn't do it. I respected him for that."

For the first time the old hunched woman—is she Thresh's grandmother?—raises her head and the trace of a smile plays on her lips.

The crowd has fallen silent now, so silent that I wonder how they manage it. They must all be holding their breath.

I turn to Rue's family. "But I feel as if I did know Rue, and she'll always be with me. Everything beautiful brings her to mind. I see her in the yellow flowers that grow in the Meadow by my house. I see her in the mockingjays that sing in the trees. But most of all, I see her in my sister, Prim." My voice is undependable, but I am almost finished. "Thank you for your children." I raise my chin to address the crowd. "And thank you all for the bread."

I stand there, feeling broken and small, thousands of eyes trained on me. There's a long pause. Then, from somewhere in the crowd, someone whistles Rue's four-note mockingjay tune. The one that signaled the end of the workday in the orchards. The one that meant safety in the arena. By the end of the tune, I have found the whistler, a wizened old man in a faded red shirt and overalls. His eyes meet mine.

What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It's our sign from District 12, the last good-bye I gave Rue in the arena.

If I hadn't spoken to President Snow, this gesture might move me to tears. But with his recent orders to calm the districts fresh in my ears, it fills me with dread. What will he think of this very public salute to the girl who defied the Capitol?

The full impact of what I've done hits me. It was not intentional—I only meant to express my thanks—but I have elicited something dangerous. An act of dissent from the people of District 11. This is exactly the kind of thing I am supposed to be defusing!

I try to think of something to say to undermine what has just happened, to negate it, but I can hear the slight burst of static indicating my microphone has been cut off and the mayor has taken over. Peeta and I acknowledge a final round of applause. He leads me back toward the doors, unaware that anything has gone wrong.

I feel funny and have to stop for a moment. Little bits of bright sunshine dance before my eyes. "Are you all right?" Peeta asks.

"Just dizzy. The sun was so bright," I say. I see his bouquet. "I forgot my flowers," I mumble. "I'll get them," he says. "I can," I answer.

We would be safe inside the Justice Building by now, if I hadn't stopped, if I hadn't left my flowers. Instead, from the deep shade of the verandah, we see the whole thing.

A pair of Peacekeepers dragging the old man who whistled to the top of the steps. Forcing him to his knees before the crowd. And putting a bullet through his head.

## 5

The man has only just crumpled to the ground when a wall of white Peacekeeper uniforms blocks our view. Several of the soldiers have automatic weapons held lengthwise as they push us back toward the door.

“We’re going!” says Peeta, shoving the Peacekeeper who’s pressing on me. “We get it, all right? Come on, Katniss.” His arm encircles me and guides me back into the Justice Building. The Peacekeepers follow a pace or two behind us. The moment we’re inside, the doors slam shut and we hear the Peacekeepers’ boots moving back toward the crowd.

Haymitch, Effie, Portia, and Cinna wait under a static-filled screen that’s mounted on the wall, their faces tight with anxiety.

“What happened?” Effie hurries over. “We lost the feed just after Katniss’s beautiful speech, and then Haymitch said he thought he heard a gun fire, and I said it was ridiculous, but who knows? There are lunatics everywhere!”

“Nothing happened, Effie. An old truck backfired,” says Peeta evenly.

Two more shots. The door doesn’t muffle their sound much. Who was that? Thresh’s grandmother? One of Rue’s little sisters?

“Both of you. With me,” says Haymitch. Peeta and I follow him, leaving the others behind. The Peacekeepers who are stationed around the Justice Building take little interest in our movements now that we are safely inside. We ascend a magnificent curved marble staircase. At the top, there’s a long hall with worn carpet on the floor. Double doors stand open, welcoming us into the first room we encounter. The ceiling must be twenty feet high. Designs of fruit and flowers are carved into the molding and small, fat children with wings look down at us from every angle. Vases of blossoms give off a cloying scent that makes my eyes itch. Our evening clothes hang on racks against the wall. This room has been prepared for our use, but we’re barely there long enough to drop off our gifts. Then Haymitch yanks the microphones from our chests, stuffs them beneath a couch cushion, and waves us on.

As far as I know, Haymitch has only been here once, when he was on his Victory Tour decades ago. But he must have a remarkable memory or reliable instincts, because he leads us up through a maze of twisting staircases and increasingly narrow halls. At times he has to stop and force a door. By the protesting squeak of the hinges you can tell it’s been a long time since it was opened. Eventually we climb a ladder to a trapdoor. When Haymitch pushes it aside, we find ourselves in the dome of the Justice Building. It’s a huge place filled with broken furniture, piles of books and ledgers, and rusty weapons. The coat of dust blanketing everything is so thick it’s clear it hasn’t been disturbed for years. Light struggles to filter in through four grimy square windows set in the sides of the dome. Haymitch kicks the trapdoor shut and turns on us. “What happened?” he asks.

Peeta relates all that occurred in the square. The whistle, the salute, our hesitation on the verandah, the murder of the old man. “What’s going on, Haymitch?”

“It will be better coming from you,” Haymitch says to me.

I don’t agree. I think it will be a hundred times worse coming from me. But I tell Peeta everything as calmly as I can. About President Snow, the unrest in the districts. I don’t even omit the kiss with Gale. I lay out how we are all in jeopardy, how the whole country is in jeopardy because of my trick with the berries. “I was supposed to fix things on this tour. Make everyone who had doubted believe I acted out of love. Calm things down. But obviously, all I’ve done today is get three people killed, and now everyone in the square will be punished.” I feel so sick that I have to sit down on a couch, despite the exposed springs and stuffing.

“Then I made things worse, too. By giving the money,” says Peeta. Suddenly he strikes out at a lamp that sits precariously on a crate and knocks it across the room, where it shatters against the

floor. "This has to stop. Right now. This—this—game you two play, where you tell each other secrets but keep them from me like I'm too inconsequential or stupid or weak to handle them."

"It's not like that, Peeta—" I begin.

"It's exactly like that!" he yells at me. "I have people I care about too, Katniss! Family and friends back in District Twelve who will be just as dead as yours if we don't pull this thing off. So, after all we went through in the arena, don't I even rate the truth from you?"

"You're always so reliably good, Peeta," says Haymitch. "So smart about how you present yourself before the cameras. I didn't want to disrupt that."

"Well, you overestimated me. Because I really screwed up today. What do you think is going to happen to Rue's and Thresh's families? Do you think they'll get their share of our winnings? Do you think I gave them a bright future? Because I think they'll be lucky if they survive the day!" Peeta sends something else flying, a statue. I've never seen him like this.

"He's right, Haymitch," I say. "We were wrong not to tell him. Even back in the Capitol."

"Even in the arena, you two had some sort of system worked out, didn't you?" asks Peeta.

His voice is quieter now. "Something I wasn't part of."

"No. Not officially. I just could tell what Haymitch wanted me to do by what he sent, or didn't send," I say.

"Well, I never had that opportunity. Because he never sent me anything until you showed up," says Peeta.

I haven't thought much about this. How it must have looked from Peeta's perspective when I appeared in the arena having received burn medicine and bread when he, who was at death's door, had gotten nothing. Like Haymitch was keeping me alive at his expense.

"Look, boy—" Haymitch begins.

"Don't bother, Haymitch. I know you had to choose one of us. And I'd have wanted it to be her. But this is something different. People are dead out there. More will follow unless we're very good. We all know I'm better than Katniss in front of the cameras. No one needs to coach me on what to say. But I have to know what I'm walking into," says Peeta.

"From now on, you'll be fully informed," Haymitch promises.

"I better be," says Peeta. He doesn't even bother to look at me before he leaves.

The dust he disrupted billows up and looks for new places to land. My hair, my eyes, my shiny gold pin.

"Did you choose me, Haymitch?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says.

"Why? You like him better," I say.

"That's true. But remember, until they changed the rules, I could only hope to get one of you out of there alive," he says. "I thought since he was determined to protect you, well, between the three of us, we might be able to bring you home."

"Oh" is all I can think to say.

"You'll see, the choices you'll have to make. If we survive this," says Haymitch. "You'll learn."

Well, I've learned one thing today. This place is not a larger version of District 12. Our fence is ungarded and rarely charged. Our Peacekeepers are unwelcome but less brutal. Our hardships evoke more fatigue than fury. Here in 11, they suffer more acutely and feel more desperation. President Snow is right. A spark could be enough to set them ablaze.

Everything is happening too fast for me to process it. The warning, the shootings, the recognition that I may have set something of great consequence in motion. The whole thing is so improbable. And it would be one thing if I had planned to stir things up, but given the circumstances ... how on earth did I cause so much trouble?

"Come on. We've got a dinner to attend," says Haymitch.

I stand in the shower as long as they let me before I have to come out to be readied. The prep team seems oblivious to the events of the day. They're all excited about the dinner. In the districts they're important enough to attend, whereas back in the Capitol they almost never score invitations to prestigious parties. While they try to predict what dishes will be served, I keep seeing the old man's head being blown off. I don't even pay attention to what anyone is doing to me until I'm about to leave and I see myself in the mirror. A pale pink strapless dress brushes my shoes. My hair is pinned back from my face and falling down my back in a shower of ringlets.

Cinna comes up behind me and arranges a shimmering silver wrap around my shoulders. He catches my eye in the mirror. "Like it?"

"It's beautiful. As always," I say.

"Let's see how it looks with a smile," he says gently. It's his reminder that in a minute, there will be cameras again. I manage to raise the corners of my lips. "There we go."

When we all assemble to go down to the dinner, I can see Effie is out of sorts. Surely, Haymitch hasn't told her about what happened in the square. I wouldn't be surprised if Cinna and Portia know, but there seems to be an unspoken agreement to leave Effie out of the bad-news loop. It doesn't take long to hear about the problem, though.

Effie runs through the evening's schedule, then tosses it aside. "And then, thank goodness, we can all get on that train and get out of here," she says.

"Is something wrong, Effie?" asks Cinna.

"I don't like the way we've been treated. Being stuffed into trucks and barred from the platform. And then, about an hour ago, I decided to look around the Justice Building. I'm something of an expert in architectural design, you know," she says.

"Oh, yes, I've heard that," says Portia before the pause gets too long.

"So, I was just having a peek around because district ruins are going to be all the rage this year, when two Peacemakers showed up and ordered me back to our quarters. One of them actually poked me with her gun!" says Effie.

I can't help thinking this is the direct result of Haymitch, Peeta, and me disappearing earlier in the day. It's a little reassuring, actually, to think that Haymitch might have been right. That no one would have been monitoring the dusty dome where we talked. Although I bet they are now.

Effie looks so distressed that I spontaneously give her a hug. "That's awful, Effie. Maybe we shouldn't go to the dinner at all. At least until they've apologized." I know she'll never agree to this, but she brightens considerably at the suggestion, at the validation of her complaint.

"No, I'll manage. It's part of my job to weather the ups and downs. And we can't let you two miss your dinner," she says. "But thank you for the offer, Katniss."

Effie arranges us in formation for our entrance. First the prep teams, then her, the stylists, Haymitch. Peeta and I, of course, bring up the rear.

Somewhere below, musicians begin to play. As the first wave of our little procession begins down the steps, Peeta and I join hands.

"Haymitch says I was wrong to yell at you. You were only operating under his instructions," says Peeta. "And it isn't as if I haven't kept things from you in the past."

I remember the shock of hearing Peeta confess his love for me in front of all of Panem. Haymitch had known about that and not told me. "I think I broke a few things myself after that interview."

"Just an urn," he says.

"And your hands. There's no point to it anymore, though, is there? Not being straight with each other?" I say.

"No point," says Peeta. We stand at the top of the stairs, giving Haymitch a fifteen-step lead as Effie directed. "Was that really the only time you kissed Gale?"



I'm so startled I answer. "Yes." With all that has happened today, has that question actually been preying on him?

"That's fifteen. Let's do it," he says.

A light hits us, and I put on the most dazzling smile I can.

We descend the steps and are sucked into what becomes an indistinguishable round of dinners, ceremonies, and train rides. Each day it's the same. Wake up. Get dressed. Ride through cheering crowds. Listen to a speech in our honor. Give a thank-you speech in return, but only the one the Capitol gave us, never any personal additions now. Sometimes a brief tour: a glimpse of the sea in one district, towering forests in another, ugly factories, fields of wheat, stinking refineries. Dress in evening clothes. Attend dinner. Train.

During ceremonies, we are solemn and respectful but always linked together, by our hands, our arms. At dinners, we are borderline delirious in our love for each other. We kiss, we dance, we get caught trying to sneak away to be alone. On the train, we are quietly miserable as we try to assess what effect we might be having.

Even without our personal speeches to trigger dissent—needless to say the ones we gave in District 11 were edited out before the event was broadcast—you can feel something in the air, the rolling boil of a pot about to run over. Not everywhere. Some crowds have the weary-cattle feel that I know District 12 usually projects at the victors' ceremonies. But in others—particularly 8, 4, and 3—there is genuine elation in the faces of the people at the sight of us, and under the elation, fury. When they chant my name, it is more of a cry for vengeance than a cheer. When the Peacekeepers move in to quiet an unruly crowd, it presses back instead of retreating. And I know that there's nothing I could ever do to change this. No show of love, however believable, will turn this tide. If my holding out those berries was an act of temporary insanity, then these people will embrace insanity, too.

Cinna begins to take in my clothes around the waist. The prep team frets over the circles under my eyes. Effie starts giving me pills to sleep, but they don't work. Not well enough. I drift off only to be roused by nightmares that have increased in number and intensity. Peeta, who spends much of the night roaming the train, hears me screaming as I struggle to break out of the haze of drugs that merely prolong the horrible dreams. He manages to wake me and calm me down. Then he climbs into bed to hold me until I fall back to sleep. After that, I refuse the pills. But every night I let him into my bed. We manage the darkness as we did in the arena, wrapped in each other's arms, guarding against dangers that can descend at any moment. Nothing else happens, but our arrangement quickly becomes a subject of gossip on the train.

When Effie brings it up to me, I think, *Good. Maybe it will get back to President Snow*. I tell her we'll make an effort to be more discreet, but we don't.

The back-to-back appearances in 2 and 1 are their own special kind of awful. Cato and Clove, the tributes from District 2, might have both made it home if Peeta and I hadn't. I personally killed the girl, Glimmer, and the boy from District 1. As I try to avoid looking at his family, I learn that his name was Marvel. How did I never know that? I suppose that before the Games I didn't pay attention, and afterward I didn't want to know.

By the time we reach the Capitol, we are desperate. We make endless appearances to adoring crowds. There is no danger of an uprising here among the privileged, among those whose names are never placed in the reaping balls, whose children never die for the supposed crimes committed generations ago. We don't need to convince anybody in the Capitol of our love but hold to the slim hope that we can still reach some of those we failed to convince in the districts. Whatever we do seems too little, too late.

Back in our old quarters in the Training Center, I'm the one who suggests the public marriage proposal. Peeta agrees to do it but then disappears to his room for a long time. Haymitch tells me to leave him alone.

"I thought he wanted it, anyway," I say.

“Not like this,” Haymitch says. “He wanted it to be real.”

I go back to my room and lie under the covers, trying not to think of Gale and thinking of nothing else.

That night, on the stage before the Training Center, we bubble our way through a list of questions. Caesar Flickerman, in his twinkling midnight blue suit, his hair, eyelids, and lips still dyed powder blue, flawlessly guides us through the interview. When he asks us about the future, Peeta gets down on one knee, pours out his heart, and begs me to marry him. I, of course, accept. Caesar is beside himself, the Capitol audience is hysterical, shots of crowds around Panem show a country besotted with happiness.

President Snow himself makes a surprise visit to congratulate us. He clasps Peeta’s hand and gives him an approving slap on the shoulder. He embraces me, enfolding me in the smell of blood and roses, and plants a puffy kiss on my cheek. When he pulls back, his fingers digging into my arms, his face smiling into mine, I dare to raise my eyebrows. They ask what my lips can’t. *Did I do it? Was it enough? Was giving everything over to you, keeping up the game, promising to marry Peeta enough?*

In answer, he gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

## 6

In that one slight motion, I see the end of hope, the beginning of the destruction of everything I hold dear in the world. I can't guess what form my punishment will take, how wide the net will be cast, but when it is finished, there will most likely be nothing left. So you would think that at this moment, I would be in utter despair. Here's what's strange. The main thing I feel is a sense of relief. That I can give up this game. That the question of whether I can succeed in this venture has been answered, even if that answer is a resounding no. That if desperate times call for desperate measures, then I am free to act as desperately as I wish.

Only not here, not quite yet. It's essential to get back to District 12, because the main part of any plan will include my mother and sister, Gale and his family. And Peeta, if I can get him to come with us. I add Haymitch to the list. These are the people I must take with me when I escape into the wild. How I will convince them, where we will go in the dead of winter, what it will take to evade capture are unanswered questions. But at least now I know what I must do.

So instead of crumpling to the ground and weeping, I find myself standing up straighter and with more confidence than I have in weeks. My smile, while somewhat insane, is not forced. And when President Snow silences the audience and says, "What do you think about us throwing them a wedding right here in the Capitol?" I pull off girl-almost-catatonic-with-joy without a hitch.

Caesar Flickerman asks if the president has a date in mind.

"Oh, before we set a date, we better clear it with Katniss's mother," says the president. The audience gives a big laugh and the president puts his arm around me. "Maybe if the whole country puts its mind to it, we can get you married before you're thirty."

"You'll probably have to pass a new law," I say with a giggle.

"If that's what it takes," says the president with conspiratorial good humor.

Oh, the fun we two have together.

The party, held in the banquet room of President Snow's mansion, has no equal. The forty-foot ceiling has been transformed into the night sky, and the stars look exactly as they do at home. I suppose they look the same from the Capitol, but who would know? There's always too much light from the city to see the stars here. About halfway between the floor and the ceiling, musicians float on what look like fluffy white clouds, but I can't see what holds them aloft. Traditional dining tables have been replaced by innumerable stuffed sofas and chairs, some surrounding fireplaces, others beside fragrant flower gardens or ponds filled with exotic fish, so that people can eat and drink and do whatever they please in the utmost comfort. There's a large tiled area in the center of the room that serves as everything from a dance floor, to a stage for the performers who come and go, to another spot to mingle with the flamboyantly dressed guests.

But the real star of the evening is the food. Tables laden with delicacies line the walls. Everything you can think of, and things you have never dreamed of, lie in wait. Whole roasted cows and pigs and goats still turning on spits. Huge platters of fowl stuffed with savory fruits and nuts. Ocean creatures drizzled in sauces or begging to be dipped in spicy concoctions. Countless cheeses, breads, vegetables, sweets, waterfalls of wine, and streams of spirits that flicker with flames.

My appetite has returned with my desire to fight back. After weeks of feeling too worried to eat, I'm famished.

"I want to taste everything in the room," I tell Peeta.

I can see him trying to read my expression, to figure out my transformation. Since he doesn't know that President Snow thinks I have failed, he can only assume that I think we have succeeded. Perhaps even that I have some genuine happiness at our engagement. His eyes reflect his puzzlement but only briefly, because we're on camera. "Then you'd better pace yourself," he says.

“Okay, no more than one bite of each dish,” I say. My resolve is almost immediately broken at the first table, which has twenty or so soups, when I encounter a creamy pumpkin brew sprinkled with slivered nuts and tiny black seeds. “I could just eat this all night!” I exclaim. But I don’t. I weaken again at a clear green broth that I can only describe as tasting like springtime, and again when I try a frothy pink soup dotted with raspberries.

Faces appear, names are exchanged, pictures taken, kisses brushed on cheeks. Apparently my mockingjay pin has spawned a new fashion sensation, because several people come up to show me their accessories. My bird has been replicated on belt buckles, embroidered into silk lapels, even tattooed in intimate places. Everyone wants to wear the winner’s token. I can only imagine how nuts that makes President Snow. But what can he do? The Games were such a hit here, where the berries were only a symbol of a desperate girl trying to save her lover.

Peeta and I make no effort to find company but are constantly sought out. We are what no one wants to miss at the party. I act delighted, but I have zero interest in these Capitol people. They are only distractions from the food.

Every table presents new temptations, and even on my restricted one-taste-per-dish regimen, I begin filling up quickly. I pick up a small roasted bird, bite into it, and my tongue floods with orange sauce. Delicious. But I make Peeta eat the remainder because I want to keep tasting things, and the idea of throwing away food, as I see so many people doing so casually, is abhorrent to me. After about ten tables I’m stuffed, and we’ve only sampled a small number of the dishes available.

Just then my prep team descends on us. They’re nearly incoherent between the alcohol they’ve consumed and their ecstasy at being at such a grand affair.

“Why aren’t you eating?” asks Octavia.

“I have been, but I can’t hold another bite,” I say. They all laugh as if that’s the silliest thing they’ve ever heard.

“No one lets that stop them!” says Flavius. They lead us over to a table that holds tiny stemmed wineglasses filled with clear liquid. “Drink this!”

Peeta picks one up to take a sip and they lose it.

“Not here!” shrieks Octavia.

“You have to do it in there,” says Venia, pointing to doors that lead to the toilets. “Or you’ll get it all over the floor!”

Peeta looks at the glass again and puts it together. “You mean this will make me puke?”

My prep team laughs hysterically. “Of course, so you can keep eating,” says Octavia. “I’ve been in there twice already. Everyone does it, or else how would you have any fun at a feast?”

I’m speechless, staring at the pretty little glasses and all they imply. Peeta sets his back on the table with such precision you’d think it might detonate. “Come on, Katniss, let’s dance.”

Music filters down from the clouds as he leads me away from the team, the table, and out onto the floor. We know only a few dances at home, the kind that go with fiddle and flute music and require a good deal of space. But Effie has shown us some that are popular in the Capitol. The music’s slow and dreamlike, so Peeta pulls me into his arms and we move in a circle with practically no steps at all. You could do this dance on a pie plate. We’re quiet for a while. Then Peeta speaks in a strained voice.

“You go along, thinking you can deal with it, thinking maybe they’re not so bad, and then you —” He cuts himself off.

All I can think of is the emaciated bodies of the children on our kitchen table as my mother prescribes what the parents can’t give. More food. Now that we’re rich, she’ll send some home with them. But often in the old days, there was nothing to give and the child was past saving, anyway. And here in the Capitol they’re vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It’s what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun.

One day when I dropped by to give Hazelle the game, Vick was home sick with a bad cough. Being part of Gale's family, the kid has to eat better than ninety percent of the rest of District 12. But he still spent about fifteen minutes talking about how they'd opened a can of corn syrup from Parcel Day and each had a spoonful on bread and were going to maybe have more later in the week. How Hazelle had said he could have a bit in a cup of tea to soothe his cough, but he wouldn't feel right unless the others had some, too. If it's like that at Gale's, what's it like in the other houses?

"Peeta, they bring us here to fight to the death for their entertainment," I say. "Really, this is nothing by comparison."

"I know. I know that. It's just sometimes I can't stand it anymore. To the point where ... I'm not sure what I'll do." He pauses, then whispers, "Maybe we were wrong, Katniss."

"About what?" I ask.

"About trying to subdue things in the districts," he says.

My head turns swiftly from side to side, but no one seems to have heard. The camera crew got sidetracked at a table of shellfish, and the couples dancing around us are either too drunk or too self-involved to notice.

"Sorry," he says. He should be. This is no place to be voicing such thoughts.

"Save it for home," I tell him.

Just then Portia appears with a large man who looks vaguely familiar. She introduces him as **Plutarch Heavensbee**<sup>5</sup>, the new **Head Gamemaker**<sup>6</sup>. Plutarch asks Peeta if he can steal me for a dance. Peeta's recovered his camera face and good-naturedly passes me over, warning the man not to get too attached.

I don't want to dance with Plutarch Heavensbee. I don't want to feel his hands, one resting against mine, one on my hip. I'm not used to being touched, except by Peeta or my family, and I rank Gamemakers somewhere below maggots in terms of creatures I want in contact with my skin. But he seems to sense this and holds me almost at arm's length as we turn on the floor.

We chitchat about the party, about the entertainment, about the food, and then he makes a joke about avoiding punch since training. I don't get it, and then I realize he's the man who tripped backward into the punch bowl when I shot an arrow at the Gamemakers during the training session. Well, not really. I was shooting an apple out of their roast pig's mouth. But I made them jump.

"Oh, you're one who—" I laugh, remembering him splashing back into the punch bowl.

"Yes. And you'll be pleased to know I've never recovered," says Plutarch.

I want to point out that twenty-two dead tributes will never recover from the Games he helped create, either. But I only say, "Good. So, you're the Head Gamemaker this year? That must be a big honor."

"Between you and me, there weren't many takers for the job," he says. "So much responsibility as to how the Games turn out."

*Yeah, the last guy's dead*, I think. He must know about Seneca Crane, but he doesn't look the least bit concerned. "Are you planning the Quarter Quell Games already?" I say.

"Oh, yes. Well, they've been in the works for years, of course. Arenas aren't built in a day. But the, shall we say, flavor of the Games is being determined now. Believe it or not, I've got a strategy meeting tonight," he says.

Plutarch steps back and pulls out a gold watch on a chain from a vest pocket. He flips open the lid, sees the time, and frowns. "I'll have to be going soon." He turns the watch so I can see the face. "It starts at midnight."

"That seems late for—" I say, but then something distracts me. Plutarch has run his thumb across the crystal face of the watch and for just a moment an image appears, glowing as if lit by

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<sup>5</sup> **Plutarch Heavensbee** – Плутарх Хевенсби

<sup>6</sup> **Head Gamemaker** – Главный распорядитель Игр

candlelight. It's another mockingjay. Exactly like the pin on my dress. Only this one disappears. He snaps the watch closed.

"That's very pretty," I say.

"Oh, it's more than pretty. It's one of a kind," he says. "If anyone asks about me, say I've gone home to bed. The meetings are supposed to be kept secret. But I thought it'd be safe to tell you."

"Yes. Your secret's safe with me," I say.

As we shake hands, he gives a small bow, a common gesture here in the Capitol. "Well, I'll see you next summer at the Games, Katniss. Best wishes on your engagement, and good luck with your mother."

"I'll need it," I say.

Plutarch disappears and I wander through the crowd, looking for Peeta, as strangers congratulate me. On my engagement, on my victory at the Games, on my choice of lipstick. I respond, but really I'm thinking about Plutarch showing off his pretty, one-of-a-kind watch to me. There was something strange about it. Almost clandestine. But why? Maybe he thinks someone else will steal his idea of putting a disappearing mockingjay on a watch face. Yes, he probably paid a fortune for it and now he can't show it to anyone because he's afraid someone will make a cheap, knockoff version. Only in the Capitol.

I find Peeta admiring a table of elaborately decorated cakes. Bakers have come in from the kitchen especially to talk frosting with him, and you can see them tripping over one another to answer his questions. At his request, they assemble an assortment of little cakes for him to take back to District 12, where he can examine their work in quiet.

"Effie said we have to be on the train at one. I wonder what time it is," he says, glancing around.

"Almost midnight," I reply. I pluck a chocolate flower from a cake with my fingers and nibble on it, so beyond worrying about manners.

"Time to say thank you and farewell!" trills Effie at my elbow. It's one of those moments when I just love her compulsive punctuality. We collect Cinna and Portia, and she escorts us around to say good-bye to important people, then herds us to the door.

"Shouldn't we thank President Snow?" asks Peeta. "It's his house."

"Oh, he's not a big one for parties. Too busy," says Effie. "I've already arranged for the necessary notes and gifts to be sent to him tomorrow. There you are!" Effie gives a little wave to two Capitol attendants who have an inebriated Haymitch propped up between them.

We travel through the streets of the Capitol in a car with darkened windows. Behind us, another car brings the prep teams. The throngs of people celebrating are so thick it's slow going. But Effie has this all down to a science, and at exactly one o'clock we are back on the train and it's pulling out of the station.

Haymitch is deposited in his room. Cinna orders tea and we all take seats around the table while Effie rattles her schedule papers and reminds us we're still on tour. "There's the Harvest Festival in District Twelve to think about. So I suggest we drink our tea and head straight to bed." No one argues.

When I open my eyes, it's early afternoon. My head rests on Peeta's arm. I don't remember him coming in last night. I turn, being careful not to disturb him, but he's already awake.

"No nightmares," he says.

"What?" I ask.

"You didn't have any nightmares last night," he says.

He's right. For the first time in ages I've slept through the night. "I had a dream, though," I say, thinking back. "I was following a mockingjay through the woods. For a long time. It was Rue, really. I mean, when it sang, it had her voice."

"Where did she take you?" he says, brushing my hair off my forehead.

"I don't know. We never arrived," I say. "But I felt happy."

"Well, you slept like you were happy," he says.

“Peeta, how come I never know when you’re having a nightmare?” I say.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I cry out or thrash around or anything. I just come to, paralyzed with terror,” he says.

“You should wake me,” I say, thinking about how I can interrupt his sleep two or three times on a bad night. About how long it can take to calm me down.

“It’s not necessary. My nightmares are usually about losing you,” he says. “I’m okay once I realize you’re here.”

Ugh. Peeta makes comments like this in such an offhand way, and it’s like being hit in the gut. He’s only answering my question honestly. He’s not pressing me to reply in kind, to make any declaration of love. But I still feel awful, as if I’ve been using him in some terrible way. Have I? I don’t know. I only know that for the first time, I feel immoral about him being here in my bed. Which is ironic since we’re officially engaged now.

“Be worse when we’re home and I’m sleeping alone again,” he says.

That’s right, we’re almost home.

The agenda for District 12 includes a dinner at Mayor Undersee’s house tonight and a victory rally in the square during the Harvest Festival tomorrow. We always celebrate the Harvest Festival on the final day of the Victory Tour, but usually it means a meal at home or with a few friends if you can afford it. This year it will be a public affair, and since the Capitol will be throwing it, everyone in the whole district will have full bellies.

Most of our prepping will take place at the mayor’s house, since we’re back to being covered in furs for outdoor appearances. We’re only at the train station briefly, to smile and wave as we pile into our car. We don’t even get to see our families until the dinner tonight.

I’m glad it will be at the mayor’s house instead of at the Justice Building, where the memorial for my father was held, where they took me after the reaping for those wrenching goodbyes to my family. The Justice Building is too full of sadness.

But I like Mayor Undersee’s house, especially now that his daughter, Madge, and I are friends. We always were, in a way. It became official when she came to say good-bye to me before I left for the Games. When she gave me the mockingjay pin for luck. After I got home, we started spending time together. It turns out Madge has plenty of empty hours to fill, too. It was a little awkward at first because we didn’t know what to do. Other girls our age, I’ve heard them talking about boys, or other girls, or clothes. Madge and I aren’t gossipy and clothes bore me to tears. But after a few false starts, I realized she was dying to go into the woods, so I’ve taken her a couple of times and showed her how to shoot. She’s trying to teach me the piano, but mostly I like to listen to her play. Sometimes we eat at each other’s houses. Madge likes mine better. Her parents seem nice but I don’t think she sees a whole lot of them. Her father has District 12 to run and her mother gets fierce headaches that force her to stay in bed for days.

“Maybe you should take her to the Capitol,” I said during one of them. We weren’t playing the piano that day, because even two floors away the sound caused her mother pain. “They can fix her up, I bet.”

“Yes. But you don’t go to the Capitol unless they invite you,” said Madge unhappily. Even the mayor’s privileges are limited.

When we reach the mayor’s house, I only have time to give Madge a quick hug before Effie hustles me off to the third floor to get ready. After I’m prepped and dressed in a full-length silver gown, I’ve still got an hour to kill before the dinner, so I slip off to find her.

Madge’s bedroom is on the second floor along with several guest rooms and her father’s study. I stick my head in the study to say hello to the mayor but it’s empty. The television’s droning on, and I stop to watch shots of Peeta and me at the Capitol party last night. Dancing, eating, kissing. This will be playing in every household in Panem right now. The audience must be sick to death of the star-crossed lovers from District 12. I know I am.

I'm leaving the room when a beeping noise catches my attention. I turn back to see the screen of the television go black. Then the words "UPDATE ON DISTRICT 8" start flashing. Instinctively I know this is not for my eyes but something intended only for the mayor. I should go. Quickly. Instead I find myself stepping closer to the television.

An announcer I've never seen before appears. It's a woman with graying hair and a hoarse, authoritative voice. She warns that conditions are worsening and a Level 3 alert has been called. Additional forces are being sent into District 8, and all textile production has ceased.

They cut away from the woman to the main square in District 8. I recognize it because I was there only last week. There are still banners with my face waving from the rooftops. Below them, there's a mob scene. The square's packed with screaming people, their faces hidden with rags and homemade masks, throwing bricks. Buildings burn. Peacekeepers shoot into the crowd, killing at random.

I've never seen anything like it, but I can only be witnessing one thing. This is what President Snow calls an uprising.



## 7

A leather bag filled with food and a flask of hot tea. A pair of fur-lined gloves that Cinna left behind. Three twigs, broken from the naked trees, lying in the snow, pointing in the direction I will travel. This is what I leave for Gale at our usual meeting place on the first Sunday after the Harvest Festival.

I have continued on through the cold, misty woods, breaking a path that will be unfamiliar to Gale but is simple for my feet to find. It leads to the lake. I no longer trust that our regular rendezvous spot offers privacy, and I'll need that and more to spill my guts to Gale today. But will he even come? If he doesn't, I'll have no choice but to risk going to his house in the dead of night. There are things he has to know... things I need him to help me figure out...

Once the implications of what I was seeing on Mayor Undersee's television hit me, I made for the door and started down the hall. Just in time, too, because the mayor came up the steps moments later. I gave him a wave.

"Looking for Madge?" he said in a friendly tone.

"Yes. I want to show her my dress," I said.

"Well, you know where to find her." Just then, another round of beeping came from his study. His face turned grave. "Excuse me," he said. He went into his study and closed the door tightly.

I waited in the hall until I had composed myself. Reminded myself I must act naturally. Then I found Madge in her room, sitting at her dressing table, brushing out her wavy blond hair before a mirror. She was in the same pretty white dress she'd worn on reaping day. She saw my reflection behind her and smiled. "Look at you. Like you came right off the streets of the Capitol."

I stepped in closer. My fingers touched the mockingjay. "Even my pin now. Mockingjays are all the rage in the Capitol, thanks to you. Are you sure you don't want it back?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, it was a gift," said Madge. She tied back her hair in a festive gold ribbon.

"Where did you get it, anyway?" I asked.

"It was my aunt's," she said. "But I think it's been in the family a long time."

"It's a funny choice, a mockingjay," I said. "I mean, because of what happened in the rebellion. With the jabber-jays backfiring on the Capitol and all."

The jabberjays were mutations, genetically enhanced male birds created by the Capitol as weapons to spy on rebels in the districts. They could remember and repeat long passages of human speech, so they were sent into rebel areas to capture our words and return them to the Capitol. The rebels caught on and turned them against the Capitol by sending them home loaded with lies. When this was discovered, the jabberjays were left to die. In a few years, they became extinct in the wild, but not before they had mated with female mockingbirds, creating an entirely new species.

"But mockingjays were never a weapon," said Madge. "They're just songbirds. Right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. But it's not true. A mockingbird is just a songbird. A mockingjay is a creature the Capitol never intended to exist. They hadn't counted on the highly controlled jabberjay having the brains to adapt to the wild, to pass on its genetic code, to thrive in a new form. They hadn't anticipated its will to live.

Now, as I trudge through the snow, I see the mockingjays hopping about on branches as they pick up on other birds' melodies, replicate them, and then transform them into something new. As always, they remind me of Rue. I think of the dream I had the last night on the train, where I followed her in mockingjay form. I wish I could have stayed asleep just a bit longer and found out where she was trying to take me.

It's a hike to the lake, no question. If he decides to follow me at all, Gale's going to be put out by this excessive use of energy that could be better spent in hunting. He was conspicuously absent from the dinner at the mayor's house, although the rest of his family came. Hazelle said he was home

sick, which was an obvious lie. I couldn't find him at the Harvest Festival, either. Vick told me he was out hunting. That was probably true.

After a couple of hours, I reach an old house near the edge of the lake. Maybe "house" is too big a word for it. It's only one room, about twelve feet square. My father thought that a long time ago there were a lot of buildings—you can still see some of the foundations—and people came to them to play and fish in the lake. This house outlasted the others because it's made of concrete. Floor, roof, ceiling. Only one of four glass windows remains, wavy and yellowed by time. There's no plumbing and no electricity, but the fireplace still works and there's a woodpile in the corner that my father and I collected years ago. I start a small fire, counting on the mist to obscure any telltale smoke. While the fire catches, I sweep out the snow that has accumulated under the empty windows, using a twig broom my father made me when I was about eight and I played house here. Then I sit on the tiny concrete hearth, thawing out by the fire and waiting for Gale.

It's a surprisingly short time before he appears. A bow slung over his shoulder, a dead wild turkey he must have encountered along the way hanging from his belt. He stands in the doorway as if considering whether or not to enter. He holds the unopened leather bag of food, the flask, Cinna's gloves. Gifts he will not accept because of his anger at me. I know exactly how he feels. Didn't I do the same thing to my mother?

I look in his eyes. His temper can't quite mask the hurt, the sense of betrayal he feels at my engagement to Peeta. This will be my last chance, this meeting today, to not lose Gale forever. I could take hours trying to explain, and even then have him refuse me. Instead I go straight to the heart of my defense.

"President Snow personally threatened to have you killed," I say.

Gale raises his eyebrows slightly, but there's no real show of fear or astonishment. "Anyone else?"

"Well, he didn't actually give me a copy of the list. But it's a good guess it includes both our families," I say.

It's enough to bring him to the fire. He crouches before the hearth and warms himself. "Unless what?"

"Unless nothing, now," I say. Obviously this requires more of an explanation, but I have no idea where to start, so I just sit there staring gloomily into the fire.

After about a minute of this, Gale breaks the silence. "Well, thanks for the heads-up."

I turn to him, ready to snap, but I catch the glint in his eye. I hate myself for smiling. This is not a funny moment, but I guess it's a lot to drop on someone. We're all going to be obliterated no matter what. "I do have a plan, you know."

"Yeah, I bet it's a stunner," he says. He tosses the gloves on my lap. "Here. I don't want your fiancée's old gloves."

"He's not my fiancée. That's just part of the act. And these aren't his gloves. They were Cinna's," I say.

"Give them back, then," he says. He pulls on the gloves, flexes his fingers, and nods in approval. "At least I'll die in comfort."

"That's optimistic. Of course, you don't know what's happened," I say.

"Let's have it," he says.

I decide to begin with the night Peeta and I were crowned victors of the Hunger Games, and Haymitch warned me of the Capitol's fury. I tell him about the uneasiness that dogged me even once I was back home, President Snow's visit to my house, the murders in District 11, the tension in the crowds, the last-ditch effort of the engagement, the president's indication that it hadn't been enough, my certainty that I'll have to pay.

Gale never interrupts. While I talk, he tucks the gloves in his pocket and occupies himself with turning the food in the leather bag into a meal for us. Toasting bread and cheese, coring apples,

placing chestnuts in the fire to roast. I watch his hands, his beautiful, capable fingers. Scarred, as mine were before the Capitol erased all marks from my skin, but strong and deft. Hands that have the power to mine coal but the precision to set a delicate snare. Hands I trust.

I pause to take a drink of tea from the flask before I tell him about my homecoming.

“Well, you really made a mess of things,” he says. “I’m not even done,” I tell him.

“I’ve heard enough for the moment. Let’s skip ahead to this plan of yours,” he says.

I take a deep breath. “We run away.”

“What?” he asks. This has actually caught him off guard.

“We take to the woods and make a run for it,” I say. His face is impossible to read. Will he laugh at me, dismiss this as foolishness? I rise in agitation, preparing for an argument. “You said yourself you thought that we could do it! That morning of the reaping. You said—”

He steps in and I feel myself lifted off the ground. The room spins, and I have to lock my arms around Gale’s neck to brace myself. He’s laughing, happy.

“Hey!” I protest, but I’m laughing, too.

Gale sets me down but doesn’t release his hold on me. “Okay, let’s run away,” he says.

“Really? You don’t think I’m mad? You’ll go with me?” Some of the crushing weight begins to lift as it transfers to Gale’s shoulders.

“I do think you’re mad and I’ll still go with you,” he says. He means it. Not only means it but welcomes it. “We can do it. I know we can. Let’s get out of here and never come back!”

“You’re sure?” I say. “Because it’s going to be hard, with the kids and all. I don’t want to get five miles into the woods and have you—”

“I’m sure. I’m completely, entirely, one hundred percent sure.” He tilts his forehead down to rest against mine and pulls me closer. His skin, his whole being, radiates heat from being so near the fire, and I close my eyes, soaking in his warmth. I breathe in the smell of snow-dampened leather and smoke and apples, the smell of all those wintry days we shared before the Games. I don’t try to move away. Why should I, anyway? His voice drops to a whisper. “I love you.”

That’s why.

I never see these things coming. They happen too fast. One second you’re proposing an escape plan and the next ... you’re expected to deal with something like this. I come up with what must be the worst possible response. “I know.”

It sounds terrible. Like I assume he couldn’t help loving me but that I don’t feel anything in return. Gale starts to draw away, but I grab hold of him. “I know! And you ... you know what you are to me.” It’s not enough. He breaks my grip. “Gale, I can’t think about anyone that way now. All I can think about, every day, every waking minute since they drew Prim’s name at the reaping, is how afraid I am. And there doesn’t seem to be room for anything else. If we could get somewhere safe, maybe I could be different. I don’t know.”

I can see him swallowing his disappointment. “So, we’ll go. We’ll find out.” He turns back to the fire, where the chestnuts are beginning to burn. He flips them out onto the hearth. “My mother’s going to take some convincing.”

I guess he’s still going, anyway. But the happiness has fled, leaving an all-too-familiar strain in its place. “Mine, too. I’ll just have to make her see reason. Take her for a long walk. Make sure she understands we won’t survive the alternative.”

“She’ll understand. I watched a lot of the Games with her and Prim. She won’t say no to you,” says Gale.

“I hope not.” The temperature in the house seems to have dropped twenty degrees in a matter of seconds. “Haymitch will be the real challenge.”

“Haymitch?” Gale abandons the chestnuts. “You’re not asking him to come with us?”

“I have to, Gale. I can’t leave him and Peeta because they’d—” His scowl cuts me off. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how large our party was,” he snaps at me.

"They'd torture them to death, trying to find out where I was," I say.

"What about Peeta's family? They'll never come. In fact, they probably couldn't wait to inform on us. Which I'm sure he's smart enough to realize. What if he decides to stay?" he asks.

I try to sound indifferent, but my voice cracks. "Then he stays."

"You'd leave him behind?" Gale asks.

"To save Prim and my mother, yes," I answer. "I mean, no! I'll get him to come."

"And me, would you leave me?" Gale's expression is rock hard now. "Just if, for instance, I can't convince my mother to drag three young kids into the wilderness in winter."

"Hazelle won't refuse. She'll see sense," I say.

"Suppose she doesn't, Katniss. What then?" he demands.

"Then you have to force her, Gale. Do you think I'm making this stuff up?" My voice is rising in anger as well.

"No. I don't know. Maybe the president's just manipulating you. I mean, he's throwing your wedding. You saw how the Capitol crowd reacted. I don't think he can afford to kill you. Or Peeta. How's he going to get out of that one?" says Gale.

"Well, with an uprising in District Eight, I doubt he's spending much time choosing my wedding cake!" I shout.

The instant the words are out of my mouth I want to reclaim them. Their effect on Gale is immediate—the flush on his cheeks, the brightness of his gray eyes. "There's an uprising in Eight?" he says in a hushed voice.

I try to backpedal. To defuse him, as I tried to defuse the districts. "I don't know if it's really an uprising. There's unrest. People in the streets—" I say.

Gale grabs my shoulders. "What did you see?"

"Nothing! In person. I just heard something." As usual, it's too little, too late. I give up and tell him. "I saw something on the mayor's television. I wasn't supposed to. There was a crowd, and fires, and the Peacekeepers were gunning people down but they were fighting back ... " I bite my lip and struggle to continue describing the scene. Instead I say aloud the words that have been eating me up inside. "And it's my fault, Gale. Because of what I did in the arena. If I had just killed myself with those berries, none of this would've happened. Peeta could have come home and lived, and everyone else would have been safe, too."

"Safe to do what?" he says in a gentler tone. "Starve? Work like slaves? Send their kids to the reaping? You haven't hurt people—you've given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it. There's already been talk in the mines. People who want to fight. Don't you see? It's happening! It's finally happening! If there's an uprising in District Eight, why not here? Why not everywhere? This could be it, the thing we've been—"

"Stop it! You don't know what you're saying. The Peacekeepers outside of Twelve, they're not like Darius, or even Cray! The lives of district people—they mean less than nothing to them!" I say.

"That's why we have to join the fight!" he answers harshly.

"No! We have to leave here before they kill us and a lot of other people, too!" I'm yelling again, but I can't understand why he's doing this. Why doesn't he see what's so undeniable?

Gale pushes me roughly away from him. "You leave, then. I'd never go in a million years."

"You were happy enough to go before. I don't see how an uprising in District Eight does anything but make it more important that we leave. You're just mad about—" No, I can't throw Peeta in his face. "What about your family?"

"What about the other families, Katniss? The ones who can't run away? Don't you see? It can't be about just saving us anymore. Not if the rebellion's begun!" Gale shakes his head, not hiding his disgust with me. "You could do so much." He throws Cinna's gloves at my feet. "I changed my mind. I don't want anything they made in the Capitol." And he's gone.

I look down at the gloves. Anything they made in the Capitol? Was that directed at me? Does he think I am now just another product of the Capitol and therefore something untouchable? The unfairness of it all fills me with rage. But it's mixed up with fear over what kind of crazy thing he might do next.

I sink down next to the fire, desperate for comfort, to work out my next move. I calm myself by thinking that rebellions don't happen in a day. Gale can't talk to the miners until tomorrow. If I can get to Hazelle before then, she might straighten him out. But I can't go now. If he's there, he'll lock me out. Maybe tonight, after everyone else is asleep ... Hazelle often works late into the night finishing up laundry. I could go then, tap at the window, tell her the situation so she'll keep Gale from doing anything foolish.

My conversation with President Snow in the study comes back to me.

*"My advisors were concerned you would be difficult, but you're not planning on being difficult at all, are you?"*

*"No."*

*"That's what I told them. I said any girl who goes to such lengths to preserve her life isn't going to be interested in throwing it away with both hands."*

I think of how hard Hazelle has worked to keep that family alive. Surely she'll be on my side in this matter. Or won't she?

It must be getting on toward noon now and the days are so short. No point in being in the woods after dark if you don't have to. I stamp out the remains of my little fire, clear up the scraps of food, and tuck Cinna's gloves in my belt. I guess I'll hang on to them for a while. In case Gale has a change of heart. I think of the look on his face when he flung them to the ground. How repelled he was by them, by me ...

I trudge through the woods and reach my old house while there's still light. My conversation with Gale was an obvious setback, but I'm still determined to carry on with my plan to escape District 12. I decide to find Peeta next. In a strange way, since he's seen some of what I've seen on the tour, he may be an easier sell than Gale was. I run into him as he's leaving the Victor's Village.

"Been hunting?" he asks. You can see he doesn't think it's a good idea.

"Not really. Going to town?" I ask.

"Yes. I'm supposed to eat dinner with my family," he says.

"Well, I can at least walk you in." The road from the Victor's Village to the square gets little use. It's a safe enough place to talk. But I can't seem to get the words out. Proposing it to Gale was such a disaster. I gnaw on my chapped lips. The square gets closer with every step. I may not have an opportunity again soon. I take a deep breath and let the words rush out. "Peeta, if I asked you to run away from the district with me, would you?"

Peeta takes my arm, bringing me to a stop. He doesn't need to check my face to see if I'm serious. "Depends on why you're asking."

"President Snow wasn't convinced by me. There's an uprising in District Eight. We have to get out," I say.

"By 'we' do you mean just you and me? No. Who else would be going?" he asks.

"My family. Yours, if they want to come. Haymitch, maybe," I say.

"What about Gale?" he says.

"I don't know. He might have other plans," I say.

Peeta shakes his head and gives me a rueful smile. "I bet he does. Sure, Katniss, I'll go."

I feel a slight twinge of hope. "You will?"

"Yeah. But I don't think for a minute you will," he says.

I jerk my arm away. "Then you don't know me. Be ready. It could be any time." I take off walking and he follows a pace or two behind.

“Katniss,” Peeta says. I don’t slow down. If he thinks it’s a bad idea, I don’t want to know, because it’s the only one I have. “Katniss, hold up.” I kick a dirty, frozen chunk of snow off the path and let him catch up. The coal dust makes everything look especially ugly. “I really will go, if you want me to. I just think we better talk it through with Haymitch. Make sure we won’t be making things worse for everyone.” He raises his head. “What’s that?”

I lift my chin. I’ve been so consumed with my own worries, I haven’t noticed the strange noise coming from the square. A whistling, the sound of an impact, the intake of breath from a crowd.

“Come on,” Peeta says, his face suddenly hard. I don’t know why. I can’t place the sound, even guess at the situation. But it means something bad to him.

When we reach the square, it’s clear something’s happening, but the crowd’s too thick to see. Peeta steps up on a crate against the wall of the sweetshop and offers me a hand while he scans the square. I’m halfway up when he suddenly blocks my way. “Get down. Get out of here!” He’s whispering, but his voice is harsh with insistence.

“What?” I say, trying to force my way back up.

“Go home, Katniss! I’ll be there in a minute, I swear!” he says.

Whatever it is, it’s terrible. I yank away from his hand and begin to push my way through the crowd. People see me, recognize my face, and then look panicked. Hands shove me back. Voices hiss.

“Get out of here, girl.”

“Only make it worse.”

“What do you want to do? Get him killed?”

But at this point, my heart is beating so fast and fierce I hardly hear them. I only know that whatever waits in the middle of the square is meant for me. When I finally break through to the cleared space, I see I am right. And Peeta was right. And those voices were right, too.

Gale’s wrists are bound to a wooden post. The wild turkey he shot earlier hangs above him, the nail driven through its neck. His jacket’s been cast aside on the ground, his shirt torn away. He slumps unconscious on his knees, held up only by the ropes at his wrists. What used to be his back is a raw, bloody slab of meat.

Standing behind him is a man I’ve never seen, but I recognize his uniform. It’s the one designated for our Head Peacekeeper. This isn’t old Cray, though. This is a tall, muscular man with sharp creases in his pants.

The pieces of the picture do not quite come together until I see his arm raise the whip.

## 8

“No!” I cry, and spring forward. It’s too late to stop the arm from descending, and I instinctively know I won’t have the power to block it. Instead I throw myself directly between the whip and Gale. I’ve flung out my arms to protect as much of his broken body as possible, so there’s nothing to deflect the lash. I take the full force of it across the left side of my face.

The pain is blinding and instantaneous. Jagged flashes of light cross my vision and I fall to my knees. One hand cups my cheek while the other keeps me from tipping over. I can already feel the welt rising up, the swelling closing my eye. The stones beneath me are wet with Gale’s blood, the air heavy with its scent. “Stop it! You’ll kill him!” I shriek.

I get a glimpse of my assailant’s face. Hard, with deep lines, a cruel mouth. Gray hair shaved almost to nonexistence, eyes so black they seem all pupils, a long, straight nose reddened by the freezing air. The powerful arm lifts again, his sights set on me. My hand flies to my shoulder, hungry for an arrow, but, of course, my weapons are stashed in the woods. I grit my teeth in anticipation of the next lash.

“Hold it!” a voice barks. Haymitch appears and trips over a Peacekeeper lying on the ground. It’s Darius. A huge purple lump pushes through the red hair on his forehead. He’s knocked out but still breathing. What happened? Did he try to come to Gale’s aid before I got here?

Haymitch ignores him and pulls me to my feet roughly. “Oh, excellent.” His hand locks under my chin, lifting it. “She’s got a photo shoot next week modeling wedding dresses. What am I supposed to tell her stylist?”

I see a flicker of recognition in the eyes of the man with the whip. Bundled against the cold, my face free of makeup, my braid tucked carelessly under my coat, it wouldn’t be easy to identify me as the victor of the last Hunger Games. Especially with half my face swelling up. But Haymitch has been showing up on television for years, and he’d be difficult to forget.

The man rests the whip on his hip. “She interrupted the punishment of a confessed criminal.”

Everything about this man, his commanding voice, his odd accent, warns of an unknown and dangerous threat. Where has he come from? District 11? 3? From the Capitol itself?

“I don’t care if she blew up the blasted Justice Building! Look at her cheek! Think that will be camera ready in a week?” Haymitch snarls.

The man’s voice is still cold, but I can detect a slight edge of doubt. “That’s not my problem.”

“No? Well, it’s about to be, my friend. The first call I make when I get home is to the Capitol,” says Haymitch. “Find out who authorized you to mess up my victor’s pretty little face!”

“He was poaching. What business is it of hers, anyway?” says the man.

“He’s her cousin.” Peeta’s got my other arm now, but gently. “And she’s my fiancée. So if you want to get to him, expect to go through both of us.”

Maybe we’re it. The only three people in the district who could make a stand like this. Although it’s sure to be temporary. There will be repercussions. But at the moment, all I care about is keeping Gale alive. The new Head Peacekeeper glances over at his backup squad. With relief, I see they’re familiar faces, old friends from the Hob. You can tell by their expressions that they’re not enjoying the show.

One, a woman named Purnia who eats regularly at Greasy Sae’s, steps forward stiffly. “I believe, for a first offense, the required number of lashes has been dispensed, sir. Unless your sentence is death, which we would carry out by firing squad.”

“Is that the standard protocol here?” asks the Head Peacekeeper.

“Yes, sir,” Purnia says, and several others nod in agreement. I’m sure none of them actually know because, in the Hob, the standard protocol for someone showing up with a wild turkey is for everybody to bid on the drumsticks.

“Very well. Get your cousin out of here, then, girl. And if he comes to, remind him that the next time he poaches off the Capitol’s land, I’ll assemble that firing squad personally.” The Head Peacekeeper wipes his hand along the length of the whip, splattering us with blood. Then he coils it into quick, neat loops and walks off.

Most of the other Peacekeepers fall in an awkward formation behind him. A small group stays behind and hoists Darius’s body up by the arms and legs. I catch Purnia’s eye and mouth the word “Thanks” before she goes. She doesn’t respond, but I’m sure she understood.

“Gale.” I turn, my hands fumbling at the knots binding his wrists. Someone passes forward a knife and Peeta cuts the ropes. Gale collapses to the ground.

“Better get him to your mother,” says Haymitch.

There’s no stretcher, but the old woman at the clothing stall sells us the board that serves as her countertop. “Just don’t tell where you got it,” she says, packing up the rest of her goods quickly. Most of the square has emptied, fear getting the better of compassion. But after what just happened, I can’t blame anyone.

By the time we’ve laid Gale facedown on the board, there’s only a handful of people left to carry him. Haymitch, Peeta, and a couple of miners who work on the same crew as Gale lift him up.

Leevy, a girl who lives a few houses down from mine in the Seam, takes my arm. My mother kept her little brother alive last year when he caught the measles. “Need help getting back?” Her gray eyes are scared but determined.

“No, but can you get Hazelle? Send her over?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says Leevy, turning on her heel.

“Leevy!” I say. “Don’t let her bring the kids.” “No. I’ll stay with them myself,” she says. “Thanks.” I grab Gale’s jacket and hurry after the others.

“Get some snow on that,” Haymitch orders over his shoulder. I scoop up a handful of snow and press it against my cheek, numbing a bit of the pain. My left eye’s tearing heavily now, and in the dimming light it’s all I can do to follow the boots in front of me.

As we walk I hear Bristel and Thorn, Gale’s crewmates, piece together the story of what happened. Gale must’ve gone to Cray’s house, as he’s done a hundred times, knowing Cray always pays well for a wild turkey. Instead he found the new Head Peacekeeper, a man they heard someone call **Romulus Thread**<sup>7</sup>. No one knows what happened to Cray. He was buying white liquor in the Hob just this morning, apparently still in command of the district, but now he’s nowhere to be found. Thread put Gale under immediate arrest and, of course, since he was standing there holding a dead turkey, there was little Gale could say in his own defense. Word of his predicament spread quickly. He was brought to the square, forced to plead guilty to his crime, and sentenced to a whipping to be carried out immediately. By the time I showed up, he’d been lashed at least forty times. He passed out around thirty.

“Lucky he only had the turkey on him,” says Bristel. “If he’d had his usual haul, would’ve been much worse.”

“He told Thread he found it wandering around the Seam. Said it got over the fence and he’d stabbed it with a stick. Still a crime. But if they’d known he’d been in the woods with weapons, they’d have killed him for sure,” says Thom.

“What about Darius?” Peeta asks.

“After about twenty lashes, he stepped in, saying that was enough. Only he didn’t do it smart and official, like Purnia did. He grabbed Thread’s arm and Thread hit him in the head with the butt of the whip. Nothing good waiting for him,” says Bristel.

“Doesn’t sound like much good for any of us,” says Haymitch.

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<sup>7</sup> **Romulus Thread** – Ромулус Тред



Snow begins, thick and wet, making visibility even more difficult. I stumble up the walk to my house behind the others, using my ears more than my eyes to guide me. A golden light colors the snow as the door opens. My mother, who was no doubt waiting for me after a long day of unexplained absence, takes in the scene.

“New Head,” Haymitch says, and she gives him a curt nod as if no other explanation is needed.

I’m filled with awe, as I always am, as I watch her transform from a woman who calls me to kill a spider to a woman immune to fear. When a sick or dying person is brought to her ... this is the only time I think my mother knows who she is. In moments, the long kitchen table has been cleared, a sterile white cloth spread across it, and Gale hoisted onto it. My mother pours water from a kettle into a basin while ordering Prim to pull a series of her remedies from the medicine cabinet. Dried herbs and tinctures and store-bought bottles. I watch her hands, the long, tapered fingers crumbling this, adding drops of that, into the basin. Soaking a cloth in the hot liquid as she gives Prim instructions to prepare a second brew.

My mother glances my way. “Did it cut your eye?”

“No, it’s just swelled shut,” I say.

“Get more snow on it,” she instructs. But I am clearly not a priority.

“Can you save him?” I ask my mother. She says nothing as she wrings out the cloth and holds it in the air to cool somewhat.

“Don’t worry,” says Haymitch. “Used to be a lot of whipping before Cray. She’s the one we took them to.”

I can’t remember a time before Cray, a time when there was a Head Peacekeeper who used the whip freely. But my mother must have been around my age and still working at the apothecary shop with her parents. Even back then, she must have had healer’s hands.

Ever so gently, she begins to clean the mutilated flesh on Gale’s back. I feel sick to my stomach, useless, the remaining snow dripping from my glove into a puddle on the floor. Peeta puts me in a chair and holds a cloth filled with fresh snow to my cheek.

Haymitch tells Bristel and Thorn to get home, and I see him press coins into their hands before they leave. “Don’t know what will happen with your crew,” he says. They nod and accept the money.

Hazelle arrives, breathless and flushed, fresh snow in her hair. Wordlessly, she sits on a stool next to the table, takes Gale’s hand, and holds it against her lips. My mother doesn’t acknowledge even her. She’s gone into that special zone that includes only herself and the patient and occasionally Prim. The rest of us can wait.

Even in her expert hands, it takes a long time to clean the wounds, arrange what shredded skin can be saved, apply a salve and a light bandage. As the blood clears, I can see where every stroke of the lash landed and feel it resonate in the single cut on my face. I multiply my own pain once, twice, forty times and can only hope that Gale remains unconscious. Of course, that’s too much to ask for. As the final bandages are being placed, a moan escapes his lips. Hazelle strokes his hair and whispers something while my mother and Prim go through their meager store of painkillers, the kind usually accessible only to doctors. They are hard to come by, expensive, and always in demand. My mother has to save the strongest for the worst pain, but what is the worst pain? To me, it’s always the pain that is present. If I were in charge, those painkillers would be gone in a day because I have so little ability to watch suffering. My mother tries to save them for those who are actually in the process of dying, to ease them out of the world.

Since Gale is regaining consciousness, they decide on an herbal concoction he can take by mouth. “That won’t be enough,” I say. They stare at me. “That won’t be enough, I know how it feels. That will barely knock out a headache.”

“We’ll combine it with sleep syrup, Katniss, and he’ll manage it. The herbs are more for the inflammation—” my mother begins calmly.

“Just give him the medicine!” I scream at her. “Give it to him! Who are you, anyway, to decide how much pain he can stand!”

Gale begins stirring at my voice, trying to reach me. The movement causes fresh blood to stain his bandages and an agonized sound to come from his mouth.

“Take her out,” says my mother. Haymitch and Peeta literally carry me from the room while I shout obscenities at her. They pin me down on a bed in one of the extra bedrooms until I stop fighting.

While I lie there, sobbing, tears trying to squeeze out of the slit of my eye, I hear Peeta whisper to Haymitch about President Snow, about the uprising in District 8. “She wants us all to run,” he says, but if Haymitch has an opinion on this, he doesn’t offer it.

After a while, my mother comes in and treats my face. Then she holds my hand, stroking my arm, while Haymitch fills her in on what happened with Gale.

“So it’s starting again?” she says. “Like before?”

“By the looks of it,” he answers. “Who’d have thought we’d ever be sorry to see old Cray go?”

Cray would have been disliked, anyway, because of the uniform he wore, but it was his habit of luring starving young women into his bed for money that made him an object of loathing in the district. In really bad times, the hungriest would gather at his door at nightfall, vying for the chance to earn a few coins to feed their families by selling their bodies. Had I been older when my father died, I might have been among them. Instead I learned to hunt.

I don’t know exactly what my mother means by things starting again, but I’m too angry and hurting to ask. It’s registered, though, the idea of worse times returning, because when the doorbell rings, I shoot straight out of bed. Who could it be at this hour of the night? There’s only one answer. Peacekeepers.

“They can’t have him,” I say.

“Might be you they’re after,” Haymitch reminds me. “Or you,” I say.

“Not my house,” Haymitch points out. “But I’ll get the door.”

“No, I’ll get it,” says my mother quietly.

We all go, though, following her down the hallway to the insistent ring of the bell. When she opens it, there’s not a squad of Peacekeepers but a single, snow-caked figure. Madge. She holds out a small, damp cardboard box to me.

“Use these for your friend,” she says. I take off the lid of the box, revealing half a dozen vials of clear liquid. “They’re my mother’s. She said I could take them. Use them, please.” She runs back into the storm before we can stop her.

“Crazy girl,” Haymitch mutters as we follow, my mother into the kitchen.

Whatever my mother had given Gale, I was right, it isn’t enough. His teeth are gritted and his flesh shines with sweat. My mother fills a syringe with the clear liquid from one of the vials and shoots it into his arm. Almost immediately, his face begins to relax.

“What is that stuff?” asks Peeta.

“It’s from the Capitol. It’s called morphling,” my mother answers.

“I didn’t even know Madge knew Gale,” says Peeta.

“We used to sell her strawberries,” I say almost angrily. What am I angry about, though? Not that she has brought the medicine, surely.

“She must have quite a taste for them,” says Haymitch.

That’s what nettles me. It’s the implication that there’s something going on between Gale and Madge. And I don’t like it.

“She’s my friend,” is all I say.

Now that Gale has drifted away on the painkiller, everyone seems to deflate. Prim makes us each eat some stew and bread. A room is offered to Hazelle, but she has to go home to the other kids. Haymitch and Peeta are both willing to stay, but my mother sends them home to bed as well. She knows it’s pointless to try this with me and leaves me to tend Gale while she and Prim rest.

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