

Chapter 9.

Betrayal. That's the first thing I feel, which is ludicrous. For there to be betrayal, there would have had to been trust first. Between Peeta and me. And trust has not been part of the agreement. We're tributes. But the boy who risked a beating to give me bread, the one who steadied me in the chariot, who covered for me with the redheaded Avox girl, who insisted Haymitch know my hunting skills . . . was there some part of me that couldn't help trusting him?

On the other hand, I'm relieved that we can stop the pretense of being friends. Obviously, whatever thin connection we'd foolishly formed has been severed. And high time, too. The Games begin in two days, and trust will only be a weakness. Whatever triggered Peeta's decision — and I suspect it had to do with my outperforming him in training — I should be nothing but grateful for it. Maybe he's finally accepted the fact that the sooner we openly acknowledge that we are enemies, the better.

"Good," I say. "So what's the schedule?"

“You’ll each have four hours with Effie for presentation and four with me for content,” says Haymitch. “You start with Effie, Katniss.”

I can’t imagine what Effie will have to teach me that could take four hours, but she’s got me working down to the last minute. We go to my rooms and she puts me in a full-length gown and high-heeled shoes, not the ones I’ll be wearing for the actual interview, and instructs me on walking. The shoes are the worst part. I’ve never worn high heels and can’t get used to essentially wobbling around on the balls of my feet. But Effie runs around in them full-time, and I’m determined that if she can do it, so can I. The dress poses another problem. It keeps tangling around my shoes so, of course, I hitch it up, and then Effie swoops down on me like a hawk, smacking my hands and yelling, “Not above the ankle!” When I finally conquer walking, there’s still sitting, posture — apparently I have a tendency to duck my head — eye contact, hand gestures, and smiling. Smiling is mostly about smiling more. Effie makes me say a hundred banal phrases starting with a smile, while smiling, or ending with a smile. By lunch, the muscles in my cheeks are twitching from overuse.

"Well, that's the best I can do," Effie says with a sigh.

"Just remember, Katniss, you want the audience to like you."

"And you don't think they will?" I ask.

"Not if you glare at them the entire time. Why don't you save that for the arena? Instead, think of yourself among friends," says Effie.

"They're betting on how long I'll live!" I burst out.

"They're not my friends!"

"Well, try and pretend!" snaps Effie. Then she composes herself and beams at me. "See, like this. I'm smiling at you even though you're aggravating me."

"Yes, it feels very convincing," I say. "I'm going to eat." I kick off my heels and stomp down to the dining room, hiking my skirt up to my thighs.

Peeta and Haymitch seem in pretty good moods, so I'm thinking the content session should be an improvement over the morning. I couldn't be more wrong. After lunch, Haymitch takes me into the sitting room, directs me to

the couch, and then just frowns at me for a while.

“What?” I finally ask.

“I’m trying to figure out what to do with you,” he says. “How we’re going to present you. Are you going to be charming? Aloof? Fierce? So far, you’re shining like a star. You volunteered to save your sister. Cinna made you look unforgettable. You’ve got the top training score. People are intrigued, but no one knows who you are. The impression you make tomorrow will decide exactly what I can get you in terms of sponsors,” says Haymitch.

Having watched the tribute interviews all my life, I know there’s truth to what he’s saying. If you appeal to the crowd, either by being humorous or brutal or eccentric, you gain favor.

“What’s Peeta’s approach? Or am I not allowed to ask?” I say.

“Likable. He has a sort of self-deprecating humor naturally,” says Haymitch. “Whereas when you open your mouth, you come across more as sullen and hostile.”

"I do not!" I say.

"Please. I don't know where you pulled that cheery, wavy girl on the chariot from, but I haven't seen her before or since," says Haymitch.

"And you've given me so many reasons to be cheery," I counter.

"But you don't have to please me. I'm not going to sponsor you. So pretend I'm the audience," says Haymitch. "Delight me."

"Fine!" I snarl. Haymitch takes the role of the interviewer and I try to answer his questions in a winning fashion. But I can't. I'm too angry with Haymitch for what he said and that I even have to answer the questions. All I can think is how unjust the whole thing is, the Hunger Games. Why am I hopping around like some trained dog trying to please people I hate? The longer the interview goes on, the more my fury seems to rise to the surface, until I'm literally spitting out answers at him.

"All right, enough," he says. "We've got to find another angle. Not only are you hostile, I don't know anything

about you. I've asked you fifty questions and still have no sense of your life, your family, what you care about. They want to know about you, Katniss."

"But I don't want them to! They're already taking my future! They can't have the things that mattered to me in the past!" I say.

"Then lie! Make something up!" says Haymitch.

"I'm not good at lying," I say.

"Well, you better learn fast. You've got about as much charm as a dead slug," says Haymitch.

Ouch. That hurts. Even Haymitch must know he's been too harsh because his voice softens. "Here's an idea. Try acting humble."

"Humble," I echo.

"That you can't believe a little girl from District Twelve has done this well. The whole thing's been more than you ever could have dreamed of. Talk about Cinna's clothes. How nice the people are. How the city amazes you. If you

won't talk about yourself, at least compliment the audience. Just keep turning it back around, all right. Gush."

The next hours are agonizing. At once, it's clear I cannot gush. We try me playing cocky, but I just don't have the arrogance. Apparently, I'm too "vulnerable" for ferocity. I'm not witty. Funny. Sexy. Or mysterious.

By the end of the session, I am no one at all. Haymitch started drinking somewhere around witty, and a nasty edge has crept into his voice. "I give up, sweetheart. Just answer the questions and try not to let the audience see how openly you despise them."

I have dinner that night in my room, ordering an outrageous number of delicacies, eating myself sick, and then taking out my anger at Haymitch, at the Hunger Games, at every living being in the Capitol by smashing dishes around my room. When the girl with the red hair comes in to turn down my bed, her eyes widen at the mess. "Just leave it!" I yell at her. "Just leave it alone!"

I hate her, too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol,

both now and then. For her, justice must finally be happening. At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods.

But instead of fleeing the room, the girl closes the door behind her and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with a damp cloth and wipes my face gently then cleans the blood from a broken plate off my hands. Why is she doing this? Why am I letting her?

"I should have tried to save you," I whisper.

She shakes her head. Does this mean we were right to stand by? That she has forgiven me?

"No, it was wrong," I say.

She taps her lips with her fingers then points to my chest. I think she means that I would just have ended up an Avox, too. Probably would have. An Avox or dead.

I spend the next hour helping the redheaded girl clean the room. When all the garbage has been dropped down a disposal and the food cleaned away, she turns down my bed. I crawl in between the sheets like a five-year-old

and let her tuck me in. Then she goes. I want her to stay until I fall asleep. To be there when I wake up. I want the protection of this girl, even though she never had mine.

In the morning, it's not the girl but my prep team who are hanging over me. My lessons with Effie and Haymitch are over. This day belongs to Cinna. He's my last hope. Maybe he can make me look so wonderful, no one will care what comes out of my mouth.

The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. Then Venia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head, and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder. They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out. Huge dark eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in gold dust.

Then Cinna enters with what I assume is my dress, but I can't really see it because it's covered. "Close your eyes," he orders.

I can feel the silken inside as they slip it down over my naked body, then the weight. It must be forty pounds. I clutch Octavia's hand as I blindly step into my shoes, glad to find they are at least two inches lower than the pair Effie had me practice in. There's some adjusting and fidgeting. Then silence.

"Can I open my eyes?" I ask.

"Yes," says Cinna. "Open them."

The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels. Because my dress, oh, my dress is entirely covered in reflective precious gems, red and yellow and white with bits of blue that accent the tips of the flame design. The slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire.

I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun.

For a while, we all just stare at me. "Oh, Cinna," I finally whisper. "Thank you."

"Twirl for me," he says. I hold out my arms and spin in a circle. The prep team screams in admiration.

Cinna dismisses the team and has me move around in the dress and shoes, which are infinitely more manageable than Effie's. The dress hangs in such a way that I don't have to lift the skirt when I walk, leaving me with one less thing to worry about.

"So, all ready for the interview then?" asks Cinna. I can see by his expression that he's been talking to Haymitch. That he knows how dreadful I am.

"I'm awful. Haymitch called me a dead slug. No matter what we tried, I couldn't do it. I just can't be one of those people he wants me to be," I say.

Cinna thinks about this a moment. "Why don't you just be yourself?"

"Myself? That's no good, either. Haymitch says I'm sullen and hostile," I say.

"Well, you are . . . around Haymitch," says Cinna with a grin. "I don't find you so. The prep team adores you. You

even won over the Gamemakers. And as for the citizens of the Capitol, well, they can't stop talking about you. No one can help but admire your spirit."

My spirit. This is a new thought. I'm not sure exactly what it means, but it suggests I'm a fighter. In a sort of brave way. It's not as if I'm never friendly. Okay, maybe I don't go around loving everybody I meet, maybe my smiles are hard to come by, but I do care for some people.

Cinna takes my icy hands in his warm ones. "Suppose, when you answer the questions, you think you're addressing a friend back home. Who would your best friend be?" asks Cinna.

"Gale," I say instantly. "Only it doesn't make sense, Cinna. I would never be telling Gale those things about me. He already knows them."

"What about me? Could you think of me as a friend?" asks Cinna.

Of all the people I've met since I left home, Cinna is by far my favorite. I liked him right off and he hasn't

disappointed me yet. "I think so, but —"

"I'll be sitting on the main platform with the other stylists. You'll be able to look right at me. When you're asked a question, find me, and answer it as honestly as possible," says Cinna.

"Even if what I think is horrible?" I ask. Because it might be, really.

"Especially if what you think is horrible," says Cinna. "You'll try it?"

I nod. It's a plan. Or at least a straw to grasp at.

Too soon it's time to go. The interviews take place on a stage constructed in front of the Training Center. Once I leave my room, it will be only minutes until I'm in front of the crowd, the cameras, all of Panem.

As Cinna turns the doorknob, I stop his hand. "Cinna . . . " I'm completely overcome with stage fright.

"Remember, they already love you," he says gently. "Just be yourself."

We meet up with the rest of the District 12 crowd at the elevator. Portia and her gang have been hard at work. Peeta looks striking in a black suit with flame accents. While we look well together, it's a relief not to be dressed identically. Haymitch and Effie are all fancied up for the occasion. I avoid Haymitch, but accept Effie's compliments. Effie can be tiresome and clueless, but she's not destructive like Haymitch.

When the elevator opens, the other tributes are being lined up to take the stage. All twenty-four of us sit in a big arc throughout the interviews. I'll be last, or second to last since the girl tribute precedes the boy from each district. How I wish I could be first and get the whole thing out of the way! Now I'll have to listen to how witty, funny, humble, fierce, and charming everybody else is before I go up. Plus, the audience will start to get bored, just as the Gamemakers did. And I can't exactly shoot an arrow into the crowd to get their attention.

Right before we parade onto the stage, Haymitch comes up behind Peeta and me and growls, "Remember, you're still a happy pair. So act like it."

What? I thought we abandoned that when Peeta asked

for separate coaching. But I guess that was a private, not a public thing. Anyway, there's not much chance for interaction now, as we walk single-file to our seats and take our places.

Just stepping on the stage makes my breathing rapid and shallow. I can feel my pulse pounding in my temples. It's a relief to get to my chair, because between the heels and my legs shaking, I'm afraid I'll trip. Although evening is falling, the City Circle is brighter than a summer's day. An elevated seating unit has been set up for prestigious guests, with the stylists commanding the front row. The cameras will turn to them when the crowd is reacting to their handiwork. A large balcony off a building to the right has been reserved for the Game-makers. Television crews have claimed most of the other balconies. But the City Circle and the avenues that feed into it are completely packed with people. Standing room only. At homes and community halls around the country, every television set is turned on. Every citizen of Panem is tuned in. There will be no blackouts tonight.

Caesar Flickerman, the man who has hosted the interviews for more than forty years, bounces onto the stage. It's a little scary because his appearance has been

virtually unchanged during all that time. Same face under a coating of pure white makeup. Same hairstyle that he dyes a different color for each Hunger Games. Same ceremonial suit, midnight blue dotted with a thousand tiny electric bulbs that twinkle like stars. They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elderly person you want to congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of survival. A plump person is envied because they aren't scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren't desirable. A round belly isn't a sign of success.

This year, Caesar's hair is powder blue and his eyelids and lips are coated in the same hue. He looks freakish but less frightening than he did last year when his color was crimson and he seemed to be bleeding. Caesar tells a few jokes to warm up the audience but then gets down to business.

The girl tribute from District 1, looking provocative in a see-through gold gown, steps up the center of the stage to join Caesar for her interview. You can tell her mentor didn't have any trouble coming up with an angle for her.

With that flowing blonde hair, emerald green eyes, her body tall and lush . . . she's sexy all the way.

Each interview only lasts three minutes. Then a buzzer goes off and the next tribute is up. I'll say this for Caesar, he really does his best to make the tributes shine. He's friendly, tries to set the nervous ones at ease, laughs at lame jokes, and can turn a weak response into a memorable one by the way he reacts.

I sit like a lady, the way Effie showed me, as the districts slip by. 2, 3, 4. Everyone seems to be playing up some angle. The monstrous boy from District 2 is a ruthless killing machine. The fox-faced girl from District 5 sly and elusive. I spotted Cinna as soon as he took his place, but even his presence cannot relax me. 8, 9, 10. The crippled boy from 10 is very quiet. My palms are sweating like crazy, but the jeweled dress isn't absorbent and they skid right off if I try to dry them. 11.

Rue, who is dressed in a gossamer gown complete with wings, flutters her way to Caesar. A hush falls over the crowd at the sight of this magical wisp of a tribute. Caesar's very sweet with her, complimenting her seven in training, an excellent score for one so small. When he

asks her what her greatest strength in the arena will be, she doesn't hesitate. "I'm very hard to catch," she says in a tremulous voice. "And if they can't catch me, they can't kill me. So don't count me out."

"I wouldn't in a million years," says Caesar encouragingly.

The boy tribute from District 11, Thresh, has the same dark skin as Rue, but the resemblance stops there. He's one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox, but I noticed he rejected the invitations from the Career Tributes to join their crowd. Instead he's been very solitary, speaking to no one, showing little interest in training. Even so, he scored a ten and it's not hard to imagine he impressed the Gamemakers. He ignores Caesar's attempts at banter and answers with a yes or no or just remains silent.

If only I was his size, I could get away with sullen and hostile and it would be just fine! I bet half the sponsors are at least considering him. If I had any money, I'd bet on him myself.

And then they're calling Katniss Everdeen, and I feel

myself, as if in a dream, standing and making my way center stage. I shake Caesar's outstretched hand, and he has the good grace not to immediately wipe his off on his suit.

"So, Katniss, the Capitol must be quite a change from District Twelve. What's impressed you most since you arrived here?" asks Caesar.

What? What did he say? It's as if the words make no sense.

My mouth has gone as dry as sawdust. I desperately find Cinna in the crowd and lock eyes with him. I imagine the words coming from his lips. "What's impressed you most since you arrived here?" I rack my brain for something that made me happy here. Be honest, I think. Be honest.

"The lamb stew," I get out.

Caesar laughs, and vaguely I realize some of the audience has joined in.

"The one with the dried plums?" asks Caesar. I nod. "Oh, I eat it by the bucketful." He turns sideways to the

audience in horror, hand on his stomach. "It doesn't show, does it?" They shout reassurances to him and applaud. This is what I mean about Caesar. He tries to help you out.

"Now, Katniss," he says confidentially, "When you came out in the opening ceremonies, my heart actually stopped. What did you think of that costume?"

Cinna raises one eyebrow at me. Be honest. "You mean after I got over my fear of being burned alive?" I ask.

Big laugh. A real one from the audience.

"Yes. Start then," says Caesar.

Cinna, my friend, I should tell him anyway. "I thought Cinna was brilliant and it was the most gorgeous costume I'd ever seen and I couldn't believe I was wearing it. I can't believe I'm wearing this, either." I lift up my skirt to spread it out. "I mean, look at it!"

As the audience oohs and ahs, I see Cinna make the tiniest circular motion with his finger. But I know what he's saying. Twirl for me.

I spin in a circle once and the reaction is immediate.

"Oh, do that again!" says Caesar, and so I lift up my arms and spin around and around letting the skirt fly out, letting the dress engulf me in flames. The audience breaks into cheers. When I stop, I clutch Caesar's arm.

"Don't stop!" he says.

"I have to, I'm dizzy!" I'm also giggling, which I think I've done maybe never in my lifetime. But the nerves and the spinning have gotten to me.

Caesar wraps a protective arm around me. "Don't worry, I've got you. Can't have you following in your mentor's footsteps."

Everyone's hooting as the cameras find Haymitch, who is by now famous for his head dive at the reaping, and he waves them away good-naturedly and points back to me.

"It's all right," Caesar reassures the crowd. "She's safe with me. So, how about that training score. E-le-ven. Give us a hint what happened in there."

I glance at the Gamemakers on the balcony and bite my lip. "Um . . . all I can say, is I think it was a first."

The cameras are right on the Gamemakers, who are chuckling and nodding.

"You're killing us," says Caesar as if in actual pain.

"Details. Details."

I address the balcony. "I'm not supposed to talk about it, right?"

The Gamemaker who fell in the punch bowl shouts out, "She's not!"

"Thank you," I say. "Sorry. My lips are sealed."

"Let's go back then, to the moment they called your sister's name at the reaping," says Caesar. His mood is quieter now. "And you volunteered. Can you tell us about her?"

No. No, not all of you. But maybe Cinna. I don't think I'm imagining the sadness on his face. "Her name's Prim. She's just twelve. And I love her more than anything."

You could hear a pin drop in the City Circle now.

"What did she say to you? After the reaping?" Caesar asks.

Be honest. Be honest. I swallow hard. "She asked me to try really hard to win." The audience is frozen, hanging on my every word.

"And what did you say?" prompts Caesar gently.

But instead of warmth, I feel an icy rigidity take over my body. My muscles tense as they do before a kill. When I speak, my voice seems to have dropped an octave. "I swore I would."

"I bet you did," says Caesar, giving me a squeeze. The buzzer goes off. "Sorry we're out of time. Best of luck, Katniss Everdeen, tribute from District Twelve."

The applause continues long after I'm seated. I look to Cinna for reassurance. He gives me a subtle thumbs-up.

I'm still in a daze for the first part of Peeta's interview. He has the audience from the get-go, though; I can hear

them laughing, shouting out. He plays up the baker's son thing, comparing the tributes to the breads from their districts. Then has a funny anecdote about the perils of the Capitol showers. "Tell me, do I still smell like roses?" he asks Caesar, and then there's a whole run where they take turns sniffing each other that brings down the house. I'm coming back into focus when Caesar asks him if he has a girlfriend back home.

Peeta hesitates, then gives an unconvincing shake of his head.

"Handsome lad like you. There must be some special girl. Come on, what's her name?" says Caesar.

Peeta sighs. "Well, there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't know I was alive until the reaping."

Sounds of sympathy from the crowd. Unrequited love they can relate to.

"She have another fellow?" asks Caesar.

"I don't know, but a lot of boys like her," says Peeta.

“So, here’s what you do. You win, you go home. She can’t turn you down then, eh?” says Caesar encouragingly.

“I don’t think it’s going to work out. Winning . . . won’t help in my case,” says Peeta.

“Why ever not?” says Caesar, mystified.

Peeta blushes beet red and stammers out. “Because . . . because . . . she came here with me.”

End of Chapter