

The Final Book of THE HUNGER GAMES

MOCKINGJAY



New York Times Bestselling Author

SUZANNE COLLINS

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For Cap, Charlie, and Isabel

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PART I

"THE ASHES"



I stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the worn leather. This is where the bed I shared with my sister, Prim, stood. Over there was the kitchen table. The bricks of the chimney, which collapsed in a charred heap, provide a point of reference for the rest of the house. How else could I orient myself in this sea of gray?

Almost nothing remains of District 12. A month ago, the Capitol's firebombs obliterated the poor coal miners' houses in the Seam, the shops in the town, even the Justice Building. The only area that escaped incineration was the Victor's Village. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps so anyone forced to come here on Capitol business would have somewhere decent to stay. The odd reporter. A committee assessing the condition of the coal mines. A squad of Peacekeepers checking for returning refugees.

But no one is returning except me. And that's only for a brief visit. The authorities in District 13 were against my coming back. They viewed it as a costly and pointless venture, given that at least a dozen invisible hovercraft are circling overhead for my protection and there's no intelligence to be gained. I had to see it, though. So much so that I made it a condition of my cooperating with any of their plans.

Finally, Plutarch Heavensbee, the Head Gamemaker who had organized the rebels in the Capitol, threw up his hands. "Let her go. Better to waste a day than another month. Maybe a little tour of Twelve is just what she needs to convince her we're on the same side."

The same side. A pain stabs my left temple and I press my hand against it. Right on the spot where Johanna Mason hit me with the coil of wire. The memories swirl as I try to sort out what is true and what is false. What series of events led me to be standing in the ruins of my city? This is hard because the effects

of the concussion she gave me haven't completely subsided and my thoughts still have a tendency to jumble together. Also, the drugs they use to control my pain and mood sometimes make me see things. I guess. I'm still not entirely convinced that I was hallucinating the night the floor of my hospital room transformed into a carpet of writhing snakes.

I use a technique one of the doctors suggested. I start with the simplest things I know to be true and work toward the more complicated. The list begins to roll in my head... .

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is thought to be dead. Most likely he is dead. It is probably best if he is dead... .

"Katniss. Should I come down?" My best friend Gale's voice reaches me through the headset the rebels insisted I wear. He's up in a hovercraft, watching me carefully, ready to swoop in if anything goes amiss. I realize I'm crouched down now, elbows on my thighs, my head braced between my hands. I must look on the verge of some kind of breakdown. This won't do. Not when they're finally weaning me off the medication.

I straighten up and wave his offer away. "No. I'm fine." To reinforce this, I begin to move away from my old house and in toward the town. Gale asked to be dropped off in 12 with me, but he didn't force the issue when I refused his company. He understands I don't want anyone with me today. Not even him. Some walks you have to take alone.

The summer's been scorching hot and dry as a bone. There's been next to no rain to disturb the piles of ash left by the attack. They shift here and there, in reaction to my footsteps. No breeze to scatter them. I keep my eyes on what I remember as the road, because when I first landed in the Meadow, I wasn't careful and I walked right into a rock. Only it wasn't a rock — it was someone's skull. It rolled over and over and landed faceup, and for a long time I couldn't stop looking at the teeth, wondering whose they were, thinking of how mine would probably look the same way under similar circumstances.

I stick to the road out of habit, but it's a bad choice, because it's full of the remains of those who tried to flee. Some were incinerated entirely. But others, probably overcome with smoke, escaped the worst of the flames and now lie reeking in various states of decomposition, carrion for scavengers, blanketed by flies. I killed you, I think as I pass a pile. And you. And you.

Because I did. It was my arrow, aimed at the chink in the force field surrounding the arena, that brought on this firestorm of retribution. That sent the whole country of Panem into chaos.

In my head I hear President Snow's words, spoken the morning I was to begin the Victory Tour. "Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem." It turns out he wasn't exaggerating or simply trying to scare me. He was, perhaps, genuinely attempting to enlist my help. But I had already set something in motion that I had no ability to control.

Burning. Still burning, I think numbly. The fires at the coal mines belch black smoke in the distance. There's no one left to care, though. More than ninety percent of the district's population is dead. The remaining eight hundred or so are refugees in District 13 — which, as far as I'm concerned, is the same thing as being homeless forever.

I know I shouldn't think that; I know I should be grateful for the way we have been welcomed. Sick, wounded, starving, and empty-handed. Still, I can never get around the fact that District 13 was instrumental in 12's destruction. This doesn't absolve me of blame — there's plenty of blame to go around. But without them, I would not have been part of a larger plot to overthrow the Capitol or had the wherewithal to do it.

The citizens of District 12 had no organized resistance movement of their own. No say in any of this. They only had the misfortune to have me. Some survivors think it's good luck, though, to be free of District 12 at last. To have escaped the endless hunger and oppression, the perilous mines, the lash of our final Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread. To have a new home at all is seen as a wonder since, up until a short time ago, we hadn't even known that District 13 still existed.

The credit for the survivors' escape has landed squarely on Gale's shoulders, although he's loath to accept it. As soon as the Quarter Quell was over — as soon as I had been lifted from the arena — the electricity in District 12 was cut, the televisions went black, and the Seam became so silent, people could hear one another's heartbeats. No one did anything to protest or celebrate what had happened in the arena. Yet within fifteen minutes, the sky was filled with hoverplanes and the bombs were raining down.

It was Gale who thought of the Meadow, one of the few places not filled with old wooden homes embedded with coal dust. He herded those he could in its direction, including my mother and Prim. He formed the team that pulled down the fence — now just a harmless chain-link barrier, with the electricity off — and led the people into the woods. He took them to the only place he could think of, the lake my father had shown me as a child. And it was from there they watched the distant flames eat up everything they knew in the world.

By dawn the bombers were long gone, the fires dying, the final stragglers rounded up. My mother and Prim had set up a medical area for the injured and were attempting to treat them with whatever they could glean from the woods. Gale had two sets of bows and arrows, one hunting knife, one fishing net, and over eight hundred terrified people to feed. With the help of those who were able-bodied, they managed for three days. And that's when the hovercraft unexpectedly arrived to evacuate them to District 13, where there were more than enough clean, white living compartments, plenty of clothing, and three meals a day. The compartments had the disadvantage of being underground, the clothing was identical, and the food was relatively tasteless, but for the refugees of 12, these were minor considerations. They were safe. They were being cared for. They were alive and eagerly welcomed.

This enthusiasm was interpreted as kindness. But a man named Dalton, a District 10 refugee who'd made it to 13 on foot a few years ago, leaked the real motive to me. "They need you. Me. They need us all. Awhile back, there was some sort of pox epidemic that killed a bunch of them and left a lot more infertile. New breeding stock. That's how they see us." Back in 10, he'd worked on one of the beef ranches, maintaining the genetic diversity of the herd with the implantation of long-frozen cow embryos. He's very

likely right about 13, because there don't seem to be nearly enough kids around. But so what? We're not being kept in pens, we're being trained for work, the children are being educated. Those over fourteen have been given entry-level ranks in the military and are addressed respectfully as "Soldier." Every single refugee was granted automatic citizenship by the authorities of 13.

Still, I hate them. But, of course, I hate almost everybody now. Myself more than anyone.

The surface beneath my feet hardens, and under the carpet of ash, I feel the paving stones of the square. Around the perimeter is a shallow border of refuse where the shops stood. A heap of blackened rubble has replaced the Justice Building. I walk to the approximate site of the bakery Peeta's family owned. Nothing much left but the melted lump of the oven. Peeta's parents, his two older brothers — none of them made it to 13. Fewer than a dozen of what passed for District 12's well-to-do escaped the fire. Peeta would have nothing to come home to, anyway. Except me ...

I back away from the bakery and bump into something, lose my balance, and find myself sitting on a hunk of sun-heated metal. I puzzle over what it might have been, then remember Thread's recent renovations of the square. Stocks, whipping posts, and this, the remains of the gallows. Bad. This is bad. It brings on the flood of images that torments me, awake or asleep. Peeta being tortured — drowned, burned, lacerated, shocked, maimed, beaten — as the Capitol tries to get information about the rebellion that he doesn't know. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to reach for him across the hundreds and hundreds of miles, to send my thoughts into his mind, to let him know he is not alone. But he is. And I can't help him.

Running. Away from the square and to the one place the fire did not destroy. I pass the wreckage of the mayor's house, where my friend Madge lived. No word of her or her family. Were they evacuated to the Capitol because of her father's position, or left to the flames? Ashes billow up around me, and I pull the hem of my shirt up over my mouth. It's not wondering what I breathe in, but who, that threatens to choke me.

The grass has been scorched and the gray snow fell here as well, but the twelve fine houses of the Victor's Village are unscathed. I bolt into the house I lived in for the past year, slam the door closed, and

lean back against it. The place seems untouched. Clean. Eerily quiet. Why did I come back to 12? How can this visit help me answer the question I can't escape?

"What am I going to do?" I whisper to the walls. Because I really don't know.

People keep talking at me, talking, talking, talking. Plutarch Heavensbee. His calculating assistant, Fulvia Cardew. A mishmash of district leaders. Military officials. But not Alma Coin, the president of 13, who just watches. She's fifty or so, with gray hair that falls in an unbroken sheet to her shoulders. I'm somewhat fascinated by her hair, since it's so uniform, so without a flaw, a wisp, even a split end. Her eyes are gray, but not like those of people from the Seam. They're very pale, as if almost all the color has been sucked out of them. The color of slush that you wish would melt away.

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. It isn't enough, what I've done in the past, defying the Capitol in the Games, providing a rallying point. I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. The person who the districts — most of which are now openly at war with the Capitol — can count on to blaze the path to victory. I won't have to do it alone. They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances — as if that doesn't sound horribly familiar — and all I have to do is play my part. Sometimes I listen to them and sometimes I just watch the perfect line of Coin's hair and try to decide if it's a wig. Eventually, I leave the room because my head starts to ache or it's time to eat or if I don't get aboveground I might start screaming. I don't bother to say anything. I simply get up and walk out.

Yesterday afternoon, as the door was closing behind me, I heard Coin say, "I told you we should have rescued the boy first." Meaning Peeta. I couldn't agree more. He would've been an excellent mouthpiece.

And who did they fish out of the arena instead? Me, who won't cooperate. Beetee, an older inventor from 3, who I rarely see because he was pulled into weapons development the minute he could sit upright. Literally, they wheeled his hospital bed into some top secret area and now he only occasionally shows up for meals. He's very smart and very willing to help the cause, but not really firebrand material. Then there's

Finnick Odair, the sex symbol from the fishing district, who kept Peeta alive in the arena when I couldn't. They want to transform Finnick into a rebel leader as well, but first they'll have to get him to stay awake for more than five minutes. Even when he is conscious, you have to say everything to him three times to get through to his brain. The doctors say it's from the electrical shock he received in the arena, but I know it's a lot more complicated than that. I know that Finnick can't focus on anything in 13 because he's trying so hard to see what's happening in the Capitol to Annie, the mad girl from his district who's the only person on earth he loves.

Despite serious reservations, I had to forgive Finnick for his role in the conspiracy that landed me here. He, at least, has some idea of what I'm going through. And it takes too much energy to stay angry with someone who cries so much.

I move through the downstairs on hunter's feet, reluctant to make any sound. I pick up a few remembrances: a photo of my parents on their wedding day, a blue hair ribbon for Prim, the family book of medicinal and edible plants. The book falls open to a page with yellow flowers and I shut it quickly because it was Peeta's brush that painted them.

What am I going to do?

Is there any point in doing anything at all? My mother, my sister, and Gale's family are finally safe. As for the rest of 12, people are either dead, which is irreversible, or protected in 13. That leaves the rebels in the districts. Of course, I hate the Capitol, but I have no confidence that my being the Mockingjay will benefit those who are trying to bring it down. How can I help the districts when every time I make a move, it results in suffering and loss of life? The old man shot in District 11 for whistling. The crackdown in 12 after I intervened in Gale's whipping. My stylist, Cinna, being dragged, bloody and unconscious, from the Launch Room before the Games. Plutarch's sources believe he was killed during interrogation. Brilliant, enigmatic, lovely Cinna is dead because of me. I push the thought away because it's too impossibly painful to dwell on without losing my fragile hold on the situation entirely.

What am I going to do?

To become the Mockingjay ... could any good I do possibly outweigh the damage? Who can I trust to answer that question? Certainly not that crew in 13. I swear, now that my family and Gale's are out of harm's way, I could run away. Except for one unfinished piece of business. Peeta. If I knew for sure that he was dead, I could just disappear into the woods and never look back. But until I do, I'm stuck.

I spin on my heel at the sound of a hiss. In the kitchen doorway, back arched, ears flattened, stands the ugliest tomcat in the world. "Buttercup," I say. Thousands of people are dead, but he has survived and even looks well fed. On what? He can get in and out of the house through a window we always left ajar in the pantry. He must have been eating field mice. I refuse to consider the alternative.

I squat down and extend a hand. "Come here, boy." Not likely. He's angry at his abandonment. Besides, I'm not offering food, and my ability to provide scraps has always been my main redeeming quality to him. For a while, when we used to meet up at the old house because we both disliked this new one, we seemed to be bonding a little. That's clearly over. He blinks those unpleasant yellow eyes.

"Want to see Prim?" I ask. Her name catches his attention. Besides his own, it's the only word that means anything to him. He gives a rusty meow and approaches me. I pick him up, stroking his fur, then go to the closet and dig out my game bag and unceremoniously stuff him in. There's no other way I'll be able to carry him on the hovercraft, and he means the world to my sister. Her goat, Lady, an animal of actual value, has unfortunately not made an appearance.

In my headset, I hear Gale's voice telling me we must go back. But the game bag has reminded me of one more thing that I want. I sling the strap of the bag over the back of a chair and dash up the steps to my bedroom. Inside the closet hangs my father's hunting jacket. Before the Quell, I brought it here from the old house, thinking its presence might be of comfort to my mother and sister when I was dead. Thank goodness, or it'd be ash now.

The soft leather feels soothing and for a moment I'm calmed by the memories of the hours spent wrapped in it. Then, inexplicably, my palms begin to sweat. A strange sensation creeps up the back of my

neck. I whip around to face the room and find it empty. Tidy. Everything in its place.

There was no sound to alarm me. What, then?

My nose twitches. It's the smell. Cloying and artificial. A dab of white peeks out of a vase of dried flowers on my dresser. I approach it with cautious steps. There, all but obscured by its preserved cousins, is a fresh white rose. Perfect. Down to the last thorn and silken petal.

And I know immediately who's sent

it to me. President Snow.

When I begin to gag at the stench, I back away and clear out. How long has it been here? A day? An hour? The rebels did a security sweep of the Victor's Village before I was cleared to come here, checking for explosives, bugs, anything unusual. But perhaps the rose didn't seem noteworthy to them. Only to me.

Downstairs, I snag the game bag off the chair, bouncing it along the floor until I remember it's occupied. On the lawn, I frantically signal to the hovercraft while Buttercup thrashes. I jab him with my elbow, but this only infuriates him. A hovercraft materializes and a ladder drops down. I step on and the current freezes me until I'm lifted on board.

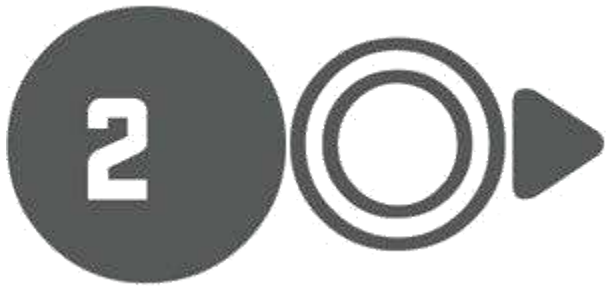
Gale helps me from the ladder. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I say, wiping the sweat off my face with my sleeve.

He left me a rose! I want to scream, but it's not information I'm sure I should share with someone like Plutarch looking on. First of all, because it will make me sound crazy. Like I either imagined it, which is quite possible, or I'm overreacting, which will buy me a trip back to the drug-induced dreamland I'm trying so hard to escape. No one will fully understand — how it's not just a flower, not even just President Snow's flower, but a promise of revenge — because no one else sat in the study with him when he threatened me before the Victory Tour.

Positioned on my dresser, that white-as-snow rose is a personal message to me. It speaks of unfinished business. It whispers,

I can find you. I can reach you. Perhaps I am watching you now.



Are there Capitol hoverplanes speeding in to blow us out of the sky? As we travel over District 12, I watch anxiously for signs of an attack, but nothing pursues us. After several minutes, when I hear an exchange between Plutarch and the pilot confirming that the airspace is clear, I begin to relax a little.

Gale nods at the howls coming from my game bag. “Now I know why you had to go back.”

“If there was even a chance of his recovery.” I dump the bag onto a seat, where the loathsome creature begins a low, deep-throated growl. “Oh, shut up,” I tell the bag as I sink into the cushioned window seat across from it.

Gale sits next to me. “Pretty bad down there?”

“Couldn’t be much worse,” I answer. I look in his eyes and see my own grief reflected there. Our hands find each other, holding fast to a part of 12 that Snow has somehow failed to destroy. We sit in silence for the rest of the trip to 13, which only takes about forty-five minutes. A mere week’s journey on foot. Bonnie and Twill, the District 8 refugees who I encountered in the woods last winter, weren’t so far from their destination after all. They apparently didn’t make it, though. When I asked about them in 13, no one seemed to know who I was talking about. Died in the woods, I guess.

From the air, 13 looks about as cheerful as 12. The rubble isn’t smoking, the way the Capitol shows it on television, but there’s next to no life aboveground. In the seventy-five years since the Dark Days — when 13 was said to have been obliterated in the war between the Capitol and the districts — almost all new construction has been beneath the earth’s surface. There was already a substantial underground facility here, developed over centuries to be either a clandestine refuge for government leaders in time of

war or a last resort for humanity if life above became unlivable. Most important for the people of 13, it was the center of the Capitol's nuclear weapons development program. During the Dark Days, the rebels in 13 wrested control from the government forces, trained their nuclear missiles on the Capitol, and then struck a bargain: They would play dead in exchange for being left alone. The Capitol had another nuclear arsenal out west, but it couldn't attack 13 without certain retaliation. It was forced to accept 13's deal. The Capitol demolished the visible remains of the district and cut off all access from the outside. Perhaps the Capitol's leaders thought that, without help, 13 would die off on its own. It almost did a few times, but it always managed to pull through due to strict sharing of resources, strenuous discipline, and constant vigilance against any further attacks from the Capitol.

Now the citizens live almost exclusively underground. You can go outside for exercise and sunlight but only at very specific times in your schedule. You can't miss your schedule. Every morning, you're supposed to stick your right arm in this contraption in the wall. It tattoos the smooth inside of your forearm with your schedule for the day in a sickly purple ink. 7:00 — Breakfast. 7:30 — Kitchen Duties. 8:30 — Education Center, Room 17. And so on. The ink is indelible until 22:00 — Bathing. That's when whatever keeps it water resistant breaks down and the whole schedule rinses away. The lights-out at 22:30 signals that everyone not on the night shift should be in bed.

At first, when I was so ill in the hospital, I could forgo being imprinted. But once I moved into Compartment 307 with my mother and sister, I was expected to get with the program. Except for showing up for meals, though, I pretty much ignore the words on my arm. I just go back to our compartment or wander around 13 or fall asleep somewhere hidden. An abandoned air duct. Behind the water pipes in the laundry. There's a closet in the Education Center that's great because no one ever seems to need school supplies. They're so frugal with things here, waste is practically a criminal activity. Fortunately, the people of 12 have never been wasteful. But once I saw Fulvia Cardew crumple up a sheet of paper with just a couple of words written on it and you would've thought she'd murdered someone from the looks she got. Her face turned tomato red, making the silver flowers inlaid in her plump cheeks even more noticeable. The very

portrait of excess. One of my few pleasures in 13 is watching the handful of pampered Capitol “rebels” squirming as they try to fit in.

I don’t know how long I’ll be able to get away with my complete disregard for the clockwork precision of attendance required by my hosts. Right now, they leave me alone because I’m classified as mentally disoriented — it says so right on my plastic medical bracelet — and everyone has to tolerate my ramblings. But that can’t last forever. Neither can their patience with the Mockingjay issue.

From the landing pad, Gale and I walk down a series of stairways to Compartment 307. We could take the elevator, only it reminds me too much of the one that lifted me into the arena. I’m having a hard time adjusting to being underground so much. But after the surreal encounter with the rose, for the first time the descent makes me feel safer.

I hesitate at the door marked 307, anticipating the questions from my family. “What am I going to tell them about Twelve?” I ask Gale.

“I doubt they’ll ask for details. They saw it burn. They’ll mostly be worried about how you’re handling it.” Gale touches my cheek. “Like I am.”

I press my face against his hand for a moment. “I’ll survive.”

Then I take a deep breath and open the door. My mother and sister are home for 18:00 — Reflection, a half hour of downtime before dinner. I see the concern on their faces as they try to gauge my emotional state. Before anyone can ask anything, I empty my game bag and it becomes 18:00 — Cat Adoration.

Prim just sits on the floor weeping and rocking that awful Buttercup, who interrupts his purring only for an occasional hiss at me. He gives me a particularly smug look when she ties the blue ribbon around his neck.

My mother hugs the wedding photo tightly against her chest and then places it, along with the book of plants, on our government-issued chest of drawers. I hang my father’s jacket on the back of a chair. For a moment, the place almost seems like home. So I guess the trip to 12 wasn’t a complete waste.

We’re heading down to the dining hall for 18:30 —Dinner when Gale’s communicuff begins to beep. It looks like an oversized watch, but it receives print messages. Being granted a communicuff is a special

privilege that's reserved for those important to the cause, a status Gale achieved by his rescue of the citizens of 12. "They need the two of us in Command," he says.

Trailing a few steps behind Gale, I try to collect myself before I'm thrown into what's sure to be another relentless Mockingjay session. I linger in the doorway of Command, the high-tech meeting/war council room complete with computerized talking walls, electronic maps showing the troop movements in various districts, and a giant rectangular table with control panels I'm not supposed to touch. No one notices me, though, because they're all gathered at a television screen at the far end of the room that airs the Capitol broadcast around the clock. I'm thinking I might be able to slip away when Plutarch, whose ample frame has been blocking the television, catches sight of me and waves urgently for me to join them. I reluctantly move forward, trying to imagine how it could be of interest to me. It's always the same. War footage. Propaganda. Replaying the bombings of District 12. An ominous message from President Snow. So it's almost entertaining to see Caesar Flickerman, the eternal host of the Hunger Games, with his painted face and sparkly suit, preparing to give an interview. Until the camera pulls back and I see that his guest is Peeta.

A sound escapes me. The same combination of gasp and groan that comes from being submerged in water, deprived of oxygen to the point of pain. I push people aside until I am right in front of him, my hand resting on the screen. I search his eyes for any sign of hurt, any reflection of the agony of torture. There is nothing. Peeta looks healthy to the point of robustness. His skin is glowing, flawless, in that full-body-polish way. His manner's composed, serious. I can't reconcile this image with the battered, bleeding boy who haunts my dreams.

Caesar settles himself more comfortably in the chair across from Peeta and gives him a long look. "So ... Peeta ... welcome back."

Peeta smiles slightly. "I bet you thought you'd done your last interview with me, Caesar."

"I confess, I did," says Caesar. "The night before the Quarter Quell ... well, who ever thought we'd see you again?"

“It wasn’t part of my plan, that’s for sure,” says Peeta with a frown.

Caesar leans in to him a little. “I think it was clear to all of us what your plan was. To sacrifice yourself in the arena so that Katniss Everdeen and your child could survive.”

“That was it. Clear and simple.” Peeta’s fingers trace the upholstered pattern on the arm of the chair. “But other people had plans as well.”

Yes, other people had plans, I think. Has Peeta guessed, then, how the rebels used us as pawns? How my rescue was arranged from the beginning? And finally, how our mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, betrayed us both for a cause he pretended to have no interest in?

In the silence that follows, I notice the lines that have formed between Peeta’s eyebrows. He has guessed or he has been told. But the Capitol has not killed or even punished him. For right now, that exceeds my wildest hopes. I drink in his wholeness, the soundness of his body and mind. It runs through me like the morphling they give me in the hospital, dulling the pain of the last weeks.

“Why don’t you tell us about that last night in the arena?” suggests Caesar. “Help us sort a few things out.”

Peeta nods but takes his time speaking. “That last night ... to tell you about that last night ... well, first of all, you have to imagine how it felt in the arena. It was like being an insect trapped under a bowl filled with steaming air. And all around you, jungle ... green and alive and ticking. That giant clock ticking away your life. Every hour promising some new horror. You have to imagine that in the past two days, sixteen people have died — some of them defending you. At the rate things are going, the last eight will be dead by morning. Save one. The victor. And your plan is that it won’t be you.”

My body breaks out in a sweat at the memory. My hand slides down the screen and hangs limply at my side. Peeta doesn’t need a brush to paint images from the Games. He works just as well in words.

“Once you’re in the arena, the rest of the world becomes very distant,” he continues. “All the people and things you loved or cared about almost cease to exist. The pink sky and the monsters in the jungle and the tributes who want your blood become your final reality, the only one that ever mattered. As bad as it

makes you feel, you're going to have to do some killing, because in the arena, you only get one wish. And it's very costly."

"It costs your life," says Caesar.

"Oh, no. It costs a lot more than your life. To murder innocent people?" says Peeta. "It costs everything you are."

"Everything you are," repeats Caesar quietly.

A hush has fallen over the room, and I can feel it spreading across Panem. A nation leaning in toward its screens. Because no one has ever talked about what it's really like in the arena before.

Peeta goes on. "So you hold on to your wish. And that last night, yes, my wish was to save Katniss. But even without knowing about the rebels, it didn't feel right. Everything was too complicated. I found myself regretting I hadn't run off with her earlier in the day, as she had suggested. But there was no getting out of it at that point."

"You were too caught up in Beetee's plan to electrify the salt lake," says Caesar.

"Too busy playing allies with the others. I should have never let them separate us!" Peeta bursts out. "That's when I lost her."

"When you stayed at the lightning tree, and she and Johanna Mason took the coil of wire down to the water," Caesar clarifies.

"I didn't want to!" Peeta flushes in agitation. "But I couldn't argue with Beetee without indicating we were about to break away from the alliance. When that wire was cut, everything just went insane. I can only remember bits and pieces. Trying to find her. Watching Brutus kill Chaff. Killing Brutus myself. I know she was calling my name. Then the lightning bolt hit the tree, and the force field around the arena ... blew out."

"Katniss blew it out, Peeta," says Caesar. "You've seen the footage."

"She didn't know what she was doing. None of us could follow Beetee's plan. You can see her trying to figure out what to do with that wire," Peeta snaps back.

“All right. It just looks suspicious,” says Caesar. “As if she was part of the rebels’ plan all along.”

Peeta’s on his feet, leaning in to Caesar’s face, hands locked on the arms of his interviewer’s chair.

“Really? And was it part of her plan for Johanna to nearly kill her? For that electric shock to paralyze her? To trigger the bombing?” He’s yelling now. “She didn’t know, Caesar! Neither of us knew anything except that we were trying to keep each other alive!”

Caesar places his hand on Peeta’s chest in a gesture that’s both self-protective and conciliatory. “Okay, Peeta, I believe you.”

“Okay.” Peeta withdraws from Caesar, pulling back his hands, running them through his hair, mussing his carefully styled blond curls. He slumps back in his chair, distraught.

Caesar waits a moment, studying Peeta. “What about your mentor, Haymitch Abernathy?” Peeta’s face hardens. “I don’t know what Haymitch knew.”

“Could he have been part of the conspiracy?” asks

Caesar. “He never mentioned it,” says Peeta.

Caesar presses on. “What does your heart tell you?”

“That I shouldn’t have trusted him,” says Peeta. “That’s all.”

I haven’t seen Haymitch since I attacked him on the hovercraft, leaving long claw marks down his face. I know it’s been bad for him here. District 13 strictly forbids any production or consumption of intoxicating beverages, and even the rubbing alcohol in the hospital is kept under lock and key. Finally, Haymitch is being forced into sobriety, with no secret stashes or home-brewed concoctions to ease his transition. They’ve got him in seclusion until he’s dried out, as he’s not deemed fit for public display. It must be excruciating, but I lost all my sympathy for Haymitch when I realized how he had deceived us. I hope he’s watching the Capitol broadcast now, so he can see that Peeta has cast him off as well.

Caesar pats Peeta’s shoulder. “We can stop now if you want.” “Was there more to discuss?” says Peeta wryly.

“I was going to ask your thoughts on the war, but if you’re too upset ...” begins Caesar.

“Oh, I’m not too upset to answer that.” Peeta takes a deep breath and then looks straight into the camera. “I want everyone watching — whether you’re on the Capitol or the rebel side — to stop for just a moment and think about what this war could mean. For human beings. We almost went extinct fighting one another before. Now our numbers are even fewer. Our conditions more tenuous. Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves off completely? In the hopes that — what? Some decent species will inherit the smoking remains of the earth?”

“I don’t really ... I’m not sure I’m following ...” says Caesar.

“We can’t fight one another, Caesar,” Peeta explains. “There won’t be enough of us left to keep going. If everybody doesn’t lay down their weapons — and I mean, as in very soon — it’s all over, anyway.”

“So ... you’re calling for a cease-fire?” Caesar asks.

“Yes. I’m calling for a cease-fire,” says Peeta tiredly. “Now why don’t we ask the guards to take me back to my quarters so I can build another hundred card houses?”

Caesar turns to the camera. “All right. I think that wraps it up. So back to our regularly scheduled programming.”

Music plays them out, and then there’s a woman reading a list of expected shortages in the Capitol — fresh fruit, solar batteries, soap. I watch her with uncharacteristic absorption, because I know everyone will be waiting for my reaction to the interview. But there’s no way I can process it all so quickly — the joy of seeing Peeta alive and unharmed, his defense of my innocence in collaborating with the rebels, and his undeniable complicity with the Capitol now that he’s called for a cease-fire. Oh, he made it sound as if he were condemning both sides in the war. But at this point, with only minor victories for the rebels, a cease-fire could only result in a return to our previous status. Or worse.

Behind me, I can hear the accusations against Peeta building. The words traitor, liar, and enemy bounce off the walls. Since I can neither join in the rebels’ outrage nor counter it, I decide the best thing to do is clear out. As I reach the door, Coin’s voice rises above the others. “You have not been dismissed, Soldier Everdeen.”

One of Coin's men lays a hand on my arm. It's not an aggressive move, really, but after the arena, I react defensively to any unfamiliar touch. I jerk my arm free and take off running down the halls. Behind me, there's the sound of a scuffle, but I don't stop. My mind does a quick inventory of my odd little hiding places, and I wind up in the supply closet, curled up against a crate of chalk.

"You're alive," I whisper, pressing my palms against my cheeks, feeling the smile that's so wide it must look like a grimace. Peeta's alive. And a traitor. But at the moment, I don't care. Not what he says, or who he says it for, only that he is still capable of speech.

After a while, the door opens and someone slips in. Gale slides down beside me, his nose trickling blood.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I got in Boggs's way," he answers with a shrug. I use my sleeve to wipe his nose. "Watch it!" I try to be gentler. Patting, not wiping. "Which one is he?"

"Oh, you know. Coin's right-hand lackey. The one who tried to stop you." He pushes my hand away. "Quit! You'll bleed me to death."

The trickle has turned to a steady stream. I give up on the first-aid attempts. "You fought with Boggs?"

"No, just blocked the doorway when he tried to follow you. His elbow caught me in the nose," says Gale.

"They'll probably punish you," I say.

"Already have." He holds up his wrist. I stare at it uncomprehendingly.

"Coin took back my communicuff."

I bite my lip, trying to remain serious. But it seems so ridiculous. "I'm sorry, Soldier Gale Hawthorne."

"Don't be, Soldier Katniss Everdeen." He grins. "I felt like a jerk walking around with it anyway." We both start laughing. "I think it was quite a demotion."

This is one of the few good things about 13. Getting Gale back. With the pressure of the Capitol's arranged marriage between Peeta and me gone, we've managed to regain our friendship. He doesn't push

it any further — try to kiss me or talk about love. Either I've been too sick, or he's willing to give me space, or he knows it's just too cruel with Peeta in the hands of the Capitol. Whatever the case, I've got someone to tell my secrets to again.

"Who are these people?" I say.

"They're us. If we'd had nukes instead of a few lumps of coal," he answers.

"I like to think Twelve wouldn't have abandoned the rest of the rebels back in the Dark Days," I say. "We might have. If it was that, surrender, or start a nuclear war," says Gale. "In a way, it's remarkable they survived at all."

Maybe it's because I still have the ashes of my own district on my shoes, but for the first time, I give the people of 13 something I have withheld from them: credit. For staying alive against all odds. Their early years must have been terrible, huddled in the chambers beneath the ground after their city was bombed to dust. Population decimated, no possible ally to turn to for aid. Over the past seventy-five years, they've learned to be self-sufficient, turned their citizens into an army, and built a new society with no help from anyone. They would be even more powerful if that pox epidemic hadn't flattened their birthrate and made them so desperate for a new gene pool and breeders. Maybe they are militaristic, overly programmed, and somewhat lacking in a sense of humor. They're here. And willing to take on the Capitol.

"Still, it took them long enough to show up," I say.

"It wasn't simple. They had to build up a rebel base in the Capitol, get some sort of underground organized in the districts," he says. "Then they needed someone to set the whole thing in motion. They needed you."

"They needed Peeta, too, but they seem to have forgotten that," I say.

Gale's expression darkens. "Peeta might have done a lot of damage tonight. Most of the rebels will dismiss what he said immediately, of course. But there are districts where the resistance is shakier. The cease-fire's clearly President Snow's idea. But it seems so reasonable coming out of Peeta's mouth."

I'm afraid of Gale's answer, but I ask anyway. "Why do you think he said it?"

“He might have been tortured. Or persuaded. My guess is he made some kind of deal to protect you. He’d put forth the idea of the cease-fire if Snow let him present you as a confused pregnant girl who had no idea what was going on when she was taken prisoner by the rebels. This way, if the districts lose, there’s still a chance of leniency for you. If you play it right.” I must still look perplexed because Gale delivers the next line very slowly. “Katniss ... he’s still trying to keep you alive.”

To keep me alive? And then I understand. The Games are still on. We have left the arena, but since Peeta and I weren’t killed, his last wish to preserve my life still stands. His idea is to have me lie low, remain safe and imprisoned, while the war plays out. Then neither side will really have cause to kill me. And Peeta? If the rebels win, it will be disastrous for him. If the Capitol wins, who knows? Maybe we’ll both be allowed to live — if I play it right — to watch the Games go on... .

Images flash through my mind: the spear piercing Rue’s body in the arena, Gale hanging senseless from the whipping post, the corpse-littered wasteland of my home. And for what? For what? As my blood turns hot, I remember other things. My first glimpse of an uprising in District 8. The victors locked hand in hand the night before the Quarter Quell. And how it was no accident, my shooting that arrow into the force field in the arena. How badly I wanted it to lodge deep in the heart of my enemy.

I spring up, upsetting a box of a hundred pencils, sending them scattering around the floor. “What is it?” Gale asks.

“There can’t be a cease-fire.” I lean down, fumbling as I shove the sticks of dark gray graphite back into the box. “We can’t go back.”

“I know.” Gale sweeps up a handful of pencils and taps them on the floor into perfect alignment.

“Whatever reason Peeta had for saying those things, he’s wrong.” The stupid sticks won’t go in the box and I snap several in my frustration.

“I know. Give it here. You’re breaking them to bits.” He pulls the box from my hands and refills it with swift, concise motions.

“He doesn’t know what they did to Twelve. If he could’ve seen what was on the ground —” I start.

“Katniss, I’m not arguing. If I could hit a button and kill every living soul working for the Capitol, I would do it. Without hesitation.” He slides the last pencil into the box and flips the lid closed. “The question is, what are you going to do?”

It turns out the question that’s been eating away at me has only ever had one possible answer. But it took Peeta’s ploy for me to recognize it.

What am I going to do?

I take a deep breath. My arms rise slightly — as if recalling the black-and-white wings Cinna gave me — then come to rest at my sides. “I’m going to be the Mockingjay.”



Buttercup's eyes reflect the faint glow of the safety light over the door as he lies in the crook of Prim's arm, back on the job, protecting her from the night. She's snuggled close to my mother. Asleep, they look just as they did the morning of the reaping that landed me in my first Games. I have a bed to myself because I'm recuperating and because no one can sleep with me anyway, what with the nightmares and the thrashing around.

After tossing and turning for hours, I finally accept that it will be a wakeful night. Under Buttercup's watchful eye, I tiptoe across the cold tiled floor to the dresser.

The middle drawer contains my government-issued clothes. Everyone wears the same gray pants and shirt, the shirt tucked in at the waist. Underneath the clothes, I keep the few items I had on me when I was lifted from the arena. My mockingjay pin. Peeta's token, the gold locket with photos of my mother and Prim and Gale inside. A silver parachute that holds a spile for tapping trees, and the pearl Peeta gave me a few hours before I blew out the force field. District 13 confiscated my tube of skin ointment for use in the hospital, and my bow and arrows because only guards have clearance to carry weapons. They're in safekeeping in the armory.

I feel around for the parachute and slide my fingers inside until they close around the pearl. I sit back on my bed cross-legged and find myself rubbing the smooth iridescent surface of the pearl back and forth against my lips. For some reason, it's soothing. A cool kiss from the giver himself.

"Katniss?" Prim whispers. She's awake, peering at me through the darkness. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing. Just a bad dream. Go back to sleep.” It’s automatic. Shutting Prim and my mother out of things to shield them.

Careful not to rouse my mother, Prim eases herself from the bed, scoops up Buttercup, and sits beside me. She touches the hand that has curled around the pearl. “You’re cold.” Taking a spare blanket from the foot of the bed, she wraps it around all three of us, enveloping me in her warmth and Buttercup’s furry heat as well. “You could tell me, you know. I’m good at keeping secrets. Even from Mother.”

She’s really gone, then. The little girl with the back of her shirt sticking out like a duck tail, the one who needed help reaching the dishes, and who begged to see the frosted cakes in the bakery window. Time and tragedy have forced her to grow too quickly, at least for my taste, into a young woman who stitches bleeding wounds and knows our mother can hear only so much.

“Tomorrow morning, I’m going to agree to be the Mockingjay,” I tell her.

“Because you want to or because you feel forced into it?” she asks.

I laugh a little. “Both, I guess. No, I want to. I have to, if it will help the rebels defeat Snow.” I squeeze the pearl more tightly in my fist. “It’s just ... Peeta. I’m afraid if we do win, the rebels will execute him as a traitor.”

Prim thinks this over. “Katniss, I don’t think you understand how important you are to the cause. Important people usually get what they want. If you want to keep Peeta safe from the rebels, you can.”

I guess I’m important. They went to a lot of trouble to rescue me. They took me to 12. “You mean ... I could demand that they give Peeta immunity? And they’d have to agree to it?”

“I think you could demand almost anything and they’d have to agree to it.” Prim wrinkles her brow. “Only how do you know they’ll keep their word?”

I remember all of the lies Haymitch told Peeta and me to get us to do what he wanted. What’s to keep the rebels from reneging on the deal? A verbal promise behind closed doors, even a statement written on paper — these could easily evaporate after the war. Their existence or validity denied. Any witnesses in

Command will be worthless. In fact, they'd probably be the ones writing out Peeta's death warrant. I'll need a much larger pool of witnesses. I'll need everyone I can get.

"It will have to be public," I say. Buttercup gives a flick of his tail that I take as agreement. "I'll make Coin announce it in front of the entire population of Thirteen."

Prim smiles. "Oh, that's good. It's not a guarantee, but it will be much harder for them to back out of their promise."

I feel the kind of relief that follows an actual solution. "I should wake you up more often, little duck." "I wish you would," says Prim. She gives me a kiss. "Try and sleep now, all right?" And I do.

In the morning, I see that 7:00 — Breakfast is directly followed by 7:30 — Command, which is fine since I may as well start the ball rolling. At the dining hall, I flash my schedule, which includes some kind of ID number, in front of a sensor. As I slide my tray along the metal shelf before the vats of food, I see breakfast is its usual dependable self — a bowl of hot grain, a cup of milk, and a small scoop of fruit or vegetables. Today, mashed turnips. All of it comes from 13's underground farms. I sit at the table assigned to the Everdeens and the Hawthornes and some other refugees, and shovel my food down, wishing for seconds, but there are never seconds here. They have nutrition down to a science. You leave with enough calories to take you to the next meal, no more, no less. Serving size is based on your age, height, body type, health, and amount of physical labor required by your schedule. The people from 12 are already getting slightly larger portions than the natives of 13 in an effort to bring us up to weight. I guess bony soldiers tire too quickly. It's working, though. In just a month, we're starting to look healthier, particularly the kids.

Gale sets his tray beside me and I try not to stare at his turnips too pathetically, because I really want more, and he's already too quick to slip me his food. Even though I turn my attention to neatly folding my napkin, a spoonful of turnips slops into my bowl.

"You've got to stop that," I say. But since I'm already scooping up the stuff, it's not too convincing.

"Really. It's probably illegal or something." They have very strict rules about food. For instance, if you don't

finish something and want to save it for later, you can't take it from the dining hall.

Apparently, in the early days, there was some incident of food hoarding. For a couple of people like Gale and me, who've been in charge of our families' food supply for years, it doesn't sit well. We know how to be hungry, but not how to be told how to handle what provisions we have. In some ways, District 13 is even more controlling than the Capitol.

"What can they do? They've already got my communicuff," says Gale.

As I scrape my bowl clean, I have an inspiration. "Hey, maybe I should make that a condition of being the Mockingjay."

"That I can feed you turnips?" he says.

"No, that we can hunt." That gets his attention. "We'd have to give everything to the kitchen. But still, we could ..." I don't have to finish because he knows. We could be aboveground. Out in the woods. We could be ourselves again.

"Do it," he says. "Now's the time. You could ask for the moon and they'd have to find some way to get it."

He doesn't know that I'm already asking for the moon by demanding they spare Peeta's life. Before I can decide whether or not to tell him, a bell signals the end of our eating shift. The thought of facing Coin alone makes me nervous. "What are you scheduled for?"

Gale checks his arm. "Nuclear History class. Where, by the way, your absence has been noted." "I have to go to Command. Come with me?" I ask.

"All right. But they might throw me out after yesterday." As we go to drop off our trays, he says, "You know, you better put Buttercup on your list of demands, too. I don't think the concept of useless pets is well known here."

"Oh, they'll find him a job. Tattoo it on his paw every morning," I say. But I make a mental note to include him for Prim's sake.

By the time we get to Command, Coin, Plutarch, and all their people have already assembled. The sight of Gale raises some eyebrows, but no one throws him out. My mental notes have become too jumbled, so I ask for a piece of paper and a pencil right off. My apparent interest in the proceedings — the first I've shown since I've been here — takes them by surprise. Several looks are exchanged. Probably they had some extra-special lecture planned for me. But instead, Coin personally hands me the supplies, and everyone waits in silence while I sit at the table and scrawl out my list. Buttercup. Hunting. Peeta's immunity. Announced in public.

This is it. Probably my only chance to bargain. Think. What else do you want? I feel him, standing at my shoulder. Gale, I add to the list. I don't think I can do this without him.

The headache's coming on and my thoughts begin to tangle. I shut my eyes and start to recite silently.

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is alive. He is a traitor but alive. I have to keep him alive... .

The list. It still seems too small. I should try to think bigger, beyond our current situation where I am of the utmost importance, to the future where I may be worth nothing. Shouldn't I be asking for more? For my family? For the remainder of my people? My skin itches with the ashes of the dead. I feel the sickening impact of the skull against my shoe. The scent of blood and roses stings my nose.

The pencil moves across the page on its own. I open my eyes and see the wobbly letters. I KILL SNOW. If he's captured, I want the privilege.

Plutarch gives a discreet cough. "About done there?" I glance up and notice the clock. I've been sitting here for twenty minutes. Finnick isn't the only one with attention problems.

"Yeah," I say. My voice sounds hoarse, so I clear my throat. "Yeah, so this is the deal. I'll be your Mockingjay."

I wait so they can make their sounds of relief, congratulate, slap one another on the back. Coin stays as impassive as ever, watching me, unimpressed.

“But I have some conditions.” I smooth out the list and begin. “My family gets to keep our cat.” My tiniest request sets off an argument. The Capitol rebels see this as a nonissue — of course, I can keep my pet — while those from 13 spell out what extreme difficulties this presents. Finally it’s worked out that we’ll be moved to the top level, which has the luxury of an eight-inch window aboveground. Buttercup may come and go to do his business. He will be expected to feed himself. If he misses curfew, he will be locked out. If he causes any security problems, he’ll be shot immediately.

That sounds okay. Not so different from how he’s been living since we left. Except for the shooting part. If he looks too thin, I can slip him a few entrails, provided my next request is allowed.

“I want to hunt. With Gale. Out in the woods,” I say. This gives everyone pause.

“We won’t go far. We’ll use our own bows. You can have the meat for the kitchen,” adds Gale.

I hurry on before they can say no. “It’s just ... I can’t breathe shut up here like a ... I would get better, faster, if ... I could hunt.”

Plutarch begins to explain the drawbacks here — the dangers, the extra security, the risk of injury — but Coin cuts him off. “No. Let them. Give them two hours a day, deducted from their training time. A quarter-mile radius. With communication units and tracker anklets. What’s next?”

I skim my list. “Gale. I’ll need him with me to do this.”

“With you how? Off camera? By your side at all times? Do you want him presented as your new lover?” Coin asks.

She hasn’t said this with any particular malice — quite the contrary, her words are very matter-of-fact. But my mouth still drops open in shock. “What?”

“I think we should continue the current romance. A quick defection from Peeta could cause the audience to lose sympathy for her,” says Plutarch. “Especially since they think she’s pregnant with his child.”

“Agreed. So, on-screen, Gale can simply be portrayed as a fellow rebel. Is that all right?” says Coin. I just stare at her. She repeats herself impatiently. “For Gale. Will that be sufficient?”

“We can always work him in as your cousin,” says Fulvia.

“We’re not cousins,” Gale and I say together.

“Right, but we should probably keep that up for appearances’ sake on camera,” says Plutarch. “Off camera, he’s all yours. Anything else?”

I’m rattled by the turn in the conversation. The implications that I could so readily dispose of Peeta, that I’m in love with Gale, that the whole thing has been an act. My cheeks begin to burn. The very notion that I’m devoting any thought to who I want presented as my lover, given our current circumstances, is demeaning. I let my anger propel me into my greatest demand. “When the war is over, if we’ve won, Peeta will be pardoned.”

Dead silence. I feel Gale’s body tense. I guess I should have told him before, but I wasn’t sure how he’d respond. Not when it involved Peeta.

“No form of punishment will be inflicted,” I continue. A new thought occurs to me. “The same goes for the other captured tributes, Johanna and Enobaria.” Frankly, I don’t care about Enobaria, the vicious District 2 tribute. In fact, I dislike her, but it seems wrong to leave her out.

“No,” says Coin flatly.

“Yes,” I shoot back. “It’s not their fault you abandoned them in the arena. Who knows what the Capitol’s doing to them?”

“They’ll be tried with other war criminals and treated as the tribunal sees fit,” she says.

“They’ll be granted immunity!” I feel myself rising from my chair, my voice full and resonant.

“You will personally pledge this in front of the entire population of District Thirteen and the remainder of Twelve. Soon. Today. It will be recorded for future generations. You will hold yourself and your government responsible for their safety, or you’ll find yourself another Mockingjay!”

My words hang in the air for a long moment.

“That’s her!” I hear Fulvia hiss to Plutarch. “Right there. With the costume, gunfire in the background, just a hint of smoke.”

“Yes, that’s what we want,” says Plutarch under his breath.

I want to glare at them, but I feel it would be a mistake to turn my attention from Coin. I can see her tallying the cost of my ultimatum, weighing it against my possible worth.

“What do you say, President?” asks Plutarch. “You could issue an official pardon, given the circumstances. The boy ... he’s not even of age.”

“All right,” Coin says finally. “But you’d better perform.”

“I’ll perform when you’ve made the announcement,” I say.

“Call a national security assembly during Reflection today,” she orders. “I’ll make the announcement then. Is there anything left on your list, Katniss?”

My paper’s crumpled into a ball in my right fist. I flatten the sheet against the table and read the rickety letters. “Just one more thing. I kill Snow.”

For the first time ever, I see the hint of a smile on the president’s lips. “When the time comes, I’ll flip you for it.”

Maybe she’s right. I certainly don’t have the sole claim against Snow’s life. And I think I can count on her getting the job done. “Fair enough.”

Coin’s eyes have flickered to her arm, the clock. She, too, has a schedule to adhere to. “I’ll leave her in your hands, then, Plutarch.” She exits the room, followed by her team, leaving only Plutarch, Fulvia, Gale, and myself.

“Excellent. Excellent.” Plutarch sinks down, elbows on the table, rubbing his eyes. “You know what I miss? More than anything? Coffee. I ask you, would it be so unthinkable to have something to wash down the gruel and turnips?”

“We didn’t think it would be quite so rigid here,” Fulvia explains to us as she massages Plutarch’s shoulders. “Not in the higher ranks.”

“Or at least there’d be the option of a little side action,” says Plutarch. “I mean, even Twelve had a black market, right?”

“Yeah, the Hob,” says Gale. “It’s where we traded.”

“There, you see? And look how moral you two are! Virtually incorruptible.” Plutarch sighs. “Oh, well, wars don’t last forever. So, glad to have you on the team.” He reaches a hand out to the side, where Fulvia is already extending a large sketchbook bound in black leather. “You know in general what we’re asking of you, Katniss. I’m aware you have mixed feelings about participating. I hope this will help.”

Plutarch slides the sketchbook across to me. For a moment, I look at it suspiciously. Then curiosity gets the better of me. I open the cover to find a picture of myself, standing straight and strong, in a black uniform. Only one person could have designed the outfit, at first glance utterly utilitarian, at second a work of art. The swoop of the helmet, the curve to the breastplate, the slight fullness of the sleeves that allows the white folds under the arms to show. In his hands, I am again a mockingjay.

“Cinna,” I whisper.

“Yes. He made me promise not to show you this book until you’d decided to be the Mockingjay on your own. Believe me, I was very tempted,” says Plutarch. “Go on. Flip through.”

I turn the pages slowly, seeing each detail of the uniform. The carefully tailored layers of body armor, the hidden weapons in the boots and belt, the special reinforcements over my heart. On the final page, under a sketch of my mockingjay pin, Cinna’s written, I’m still betting on you.

“When did he ...” My voice fails me.

“Let’s see. Well, after the Quarter Quell announcement. A few weeks before the Games maybe? There are not only the sketches. We have your uniforms. Oh, and Beetee’s got something really special waiting for you down in the armory. I won’t spoil it by hinting,” says Plutarch.

“You’re going to be the best-dressed rebel in history,” says Gale with a smile. Suddenly, I realize he’s been holding out on me. Like Cinna, he’s wanted me to make this decision all along.

“Our plan is to launch an Airtime Assault,” says Plutarch. “To make a series of what we call propos — which is short for ‘propaganda spots’ — featuring you, and broadcast them to the entire population of Panem.”

“How? The Capitol has sole control of the broadcasts,” says Gale.

“But we have Beetee. About ten years ago, he essentially redesigned the underground network that transmits all the programming. He thinks there’s a reasonable chance it can be done. Of course, we’ll need something to air. So, Katniss, the studio awaits your pleasure.” Plutarch turns to his assistant. “Fulvia?”

“Plutarch and I have been talking about how on earth we can pull this off. We think that it might be best to build you, our rebel leader, from the outside ... in. That is to say, let’s find the most stunning Mockingjay look possible, and then work your personality up to deserving it!” she says brightly.

“You already have her uniform,” says Gale.

“Yes, but is she scarred and bloody? Is she glowing with the fire of rebellion? Just how grimy can we make her without disgusting people? At any rate, she has to be something. I mean, obviously this” — Fulvia moves in on me quickly, framing my face with her hands — “won’t cut it.” I jerk my head back reflexively but she’s already busy gathering her things. “So, with that in mind, we have another little surprise for you. Come, come.”

Fulvia gives us a wave, and Gale and I follow her and Plutarch out into the hall. “So well intended, and yet so insulting,” Gale whispers in my ear.

“Welcome to the Capitol,” I mouth back. But Fulvia’s words have no effect on me. I wrap my arms tightly around the sketchbook and allow myself to feel hopeful. This must be the right decision. If Cinna wanted it.

We board an elevator, and Plutarch checks his notes. “Let’s see. It’s Compartment Three-Nine-Oh-Eight.” He presses a button marked 39, but nothing happens.

“You must have to key it,” says Fulvia.

Plutarch pulls a key attached to a thin chain from under his shirt and inserts it into a slot I hadn’t noticed before. The doors slide shut. “Ah, there we are.”

The elevator descends ten, twenty, thirty-plus levels, farther down than I even knew District 13 went. It opens on a wide white corridor lined with red doors, which look almost decorative compared to the gray ones on the upper floors. Each is plainly marked with a number. 3901, 3902, 3903 ...

As we step out, I glance behind me to watch the elevator close and see a metallic grate slide into place over the regular doors. When I turn, a guard has materialized from one of the rooms at the far end of the corridor. A door swings silently shut behind him as he strides toward us.

Plutarch moves to meet him, raising a hand in greeting, and the rest of us follow behind him. Something feels very wrong down here. It's more than the reinforced elevator, or the claustrophobia of being so far underground, or the caustic smell of antiseptic. One look at Gale's face and I can tell he senses it as well.

"Good morning, we were just looking for —" Plutarch begins.

"You have the wrong floor," says the guard abruptly.

"Really?" Plutarch double-checks his notes. "I've got Three-Nine-Oh-Eight written right here. I wonder if you could just give a call up to —"

"I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave now. Assignment discrepancies can be addressed at the Head Office," says the guard.

It's right ahead of us. Compartment 3908. Just a few steps away. The door — in fact, all the doors — seem incomplete. No knobs. They must swing free on hinges like the one the guard appeared through.

"Where is that again?" asks Fulvia.

"You'll find the Head Office on Level Seven," says the guard, extending his arms to corral us back to the elevator.

From behind door 3908 comes a sound. Just a tiny whimper. Like something a cowed dog might make to avoid being struck, only all too human and familiar. My eyes meet Gale's for just a moment, but it's long enough for two people who operate the way we do. I let Cinna's sketchbook fall at the guard's feet with a loud bang. A second after he leans down to retrieve it, Gale leans down, too, intentionally bumping heads. "Oh, I'm sorry," he says with a light laugh, catching the guard's arms as if to steady himself, turning him slightly away from me.

That's my chance. I dart around the distracted guard, push open the door marked 3908, and find them. Half-naked, bruised, and shackled to the wall.

My prep team.