

The Second Book of THE HUNGER GAMES

# CATCHING FIRE



*New York Times* Bestselling Author

**SUZANNE  
COLLINS**

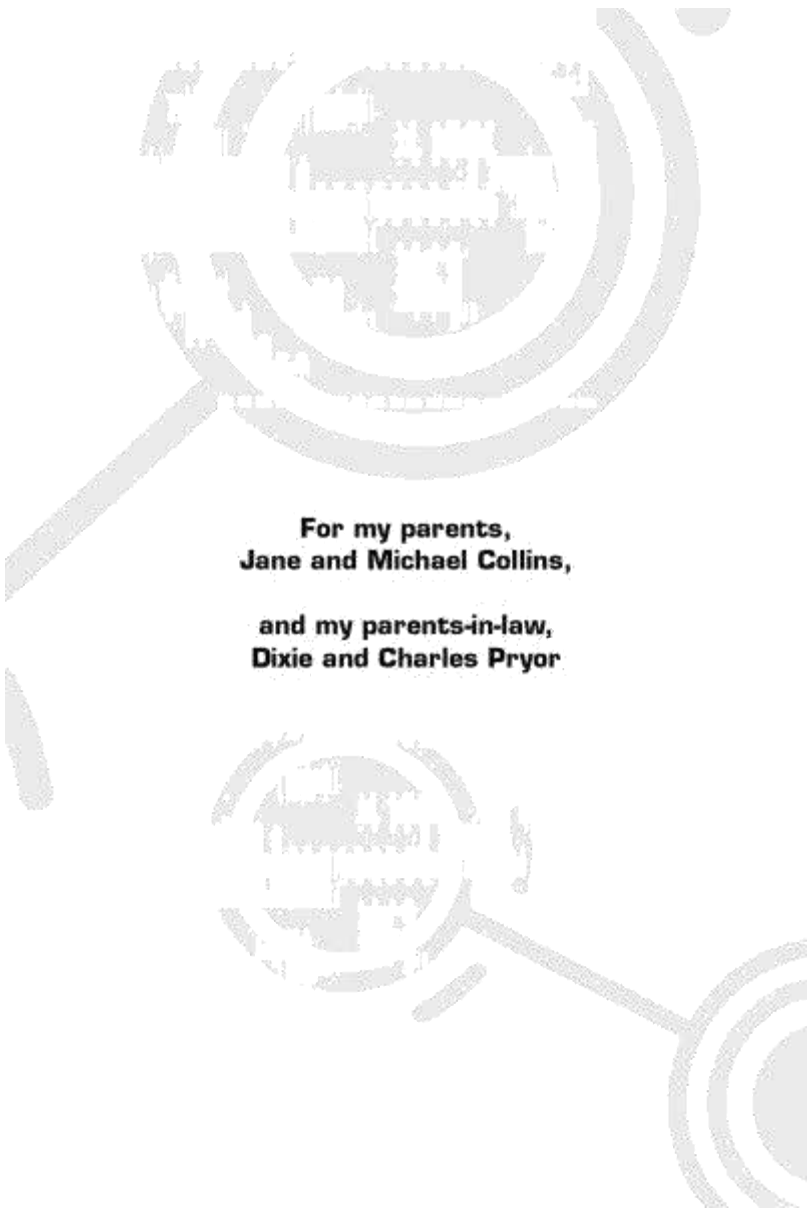


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COLLINS

# CATCHING FIRE



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**For my parents,  
Jane and Michael Collins,**

**and my parents-in-law,  
Dixie and Charles Pryor**

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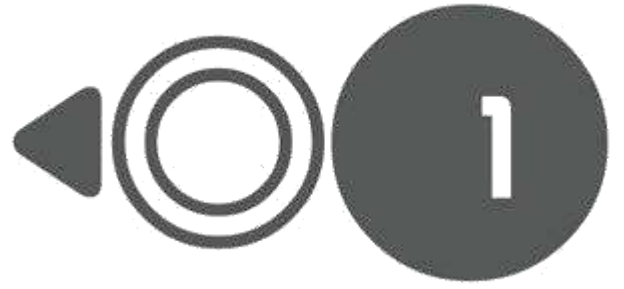
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## **PART I**

"THE SPARK"



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, 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 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 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.

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 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 grounds-keeper, exudes an air of abandonment and neglect. I brace myself at his front door, knowing it will be foul, then push inside.

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.



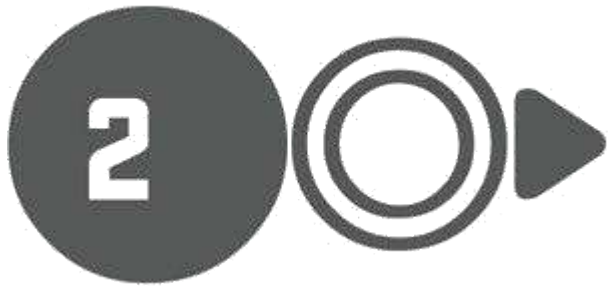
“This way, please, Miss Everdeen,” says the man. He gestures down the hallway. It’s weird to be ushered around your own home, but I know better than to comment on it.

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.



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.



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.

“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.

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 taillights. "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.