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**THE
HUNGER
GAMES
CATCHING FIRE**



SUZANNE COLLINS

 **SCHOLASTIC**



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 favour. 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 colour 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, any more. 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 on to 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 favour, 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 fitted 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 on to 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 meagre 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 favourites. 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, grey 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 kilometre-long walk from the square in the centre 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 coloured corn affixed to the front doors as decoration for the upcoming Harvest Festival. However, Haymitch's house, despite the care taken by the groundskeeper, exudes an air of abandonment and neglect. I brace myself at his front door, knowing it will be foul, then push inside.

My nose immediately wrinkles in disgust. Haymitch refuses to let anyone in to clean and does a

poor job himself. Over the years the odours 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 rubbish on the floor, and I unearth a tin coffee pot 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 a metre behind him and wielding a knife. I forgot he always sleeps with one

clutched in his hand. I should have prised it from his fingers, but I've had a lot on my mind. Spewing profanities, he slashes the air a few moments before coming to his senses. He wipes his face on his shirtsleeve and turns to the window sill 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 shirt tail 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 of 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 towards 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.