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THE HUNGER GAMES

CATCHING FIRE

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC

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PART I

THE SPARK

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1

I clasp the flask between my hands even though the warmth from the tea has long since leached into the frozen air. My muscles are clenched tight against the cold. If a pack of wild dogs were to appear at this moment, the odds of scaling a tree before they attacked are not in my 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

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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

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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,

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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"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