**Chapter 3**

The moment the anthem ends, we are taken into custody. I don’t mean we’re handcuffed or anything, but a group of Peacekeepers marches through the front door of the Justice Building. Maybe tributes have tried to escape in the past. I’ve never seen that happen though.

Once inside, I’m conduced to a room and left alone. It’s the richest place, I’ve ever been in, with thick, deep carpets and a velvet couch and chairs. I know velvet because my mother has a dress with a collar made of the stuff. When I sit on the couch, I can’t help running my fingers over the fabric repeatedly. It helps to calm me as I try to prepare for the next hour. The time allotted for the tributes to say goodbye to their loved ones. I cannot afford to get upset, to leave this room with puffy eyes and a red nose. Crying is not an option. There will be more cameras at the train station.

My sister and my mother come first. I reach out to Prim and she climbs on my lap, her arms around my neck, head on my shoulder, just like she did when she was a toddler. My mother sits beside me and wraps her arms around us. For a few minutes, we say nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must remember to do, now that I will not be there to do them for them.

Prim is not to take any tesserae. They can get by, if they’re careful, on selling Prim’s goat milk and cheese and the small apothecary business my mother now runs for the people in the Seam. Gale will get her the herbs she doesn’t grow herself, but she must be very careful to describe them because he’s not as familiar with them as I am. He’ll also bring them game – he and I made a pact about this a year or so ago – and he will probably not ask for compensation, but they should thank him with some kind of trade, like milk or medicine.

I don’t bother suggesting Prim learn to hunt. I tried to teach her a couple of times and it was disastrous. The woods terrified her, and whenever I shot something, she’s get teary and talk about how we might be able to heal it if we got it home soon enough. But she makes out well with her goat, so I concentrate on that.

When I am done with instructions about fuel, and trading, and staying in school, I turn to my mother and grip her arm, hard. “Listen to me. Are you listening to me?” She nods, alarmed by my intensity. She must know what’s coming. “You can’t leave again,” I say.

My mother’s eyes find the floor. “I know. I won’t. I couldn’t help what –“

“Well, you have to help it this time. You can’t clock out and leave Prim on her own. There’s no me now to keep you both alive. It doesn’t matter what happens. Whatever you see on the screen. You have to promise me you’ll fight through it!” My voice has risen to a shout. In it is all the anger, all the fear I felt at her abandonment.

She pulls her arm from my grasp, moved to anger herself now. “I was ill. I could have treated myself if I’d had the medicine I have now.”

That part about her being ill might be true. I’ve seen her bring back people suffering from immobilizing sadness since. Perhaps it is a sickness, but it’s one we can’t afford.

“Then take it. And take care of her!” I say.

“I’ll be all right, Katniss,” says Prm, clasping my face in her hands. “But you have to take care, too. You’re so fast and brave. Maybe you can win.”

I can’t win. Prim must know that in her heart. The competition will be far beyond my abilities. Kids from wealthier districts, where winning is a huge honor, who’ve been trained their whole lives for this. Boys who are two to three times my size. Girls who know twenty different ways to kill you with a knife. Oh, there’ll be people like me, too. People to weed out before the real fun begins.

“Maybe,” I say, because I can hardly tell my mother to carry on if I’ve already given up myself. Besides, it isn’t in my nature to go down without a fight, even when things seem insurmountable. “Then we’d be as rich as Haymitch.”

“I don’t care if we’re rich. I just want you to come home. You will try won’t you? Really, really try?” asks Prim.

And then the Peacekeeper is at the door, signaling our time is up, and we’re all hugging one another so hard it hurts and all I’m saying is “I love you. I love you both.” And they’re saying it back and then the Peacekeeper orders them out and the door closes. I bury my head in one of the velvet pillows as if this can block the whole thing out.

Someone else enters the room, I’m surprised to see it’s the baker, Peeta Mellark’s father. I can’t believe he’s come to visit me. After all, I’ll be trying to kill his son soon. But we do know each other a bit, and he knows Prim even better. When she sells her goat cheeses at the Hob, she puts two of them aside for him and he gives her a generous amount of bread in return. We always wait to trade with him when his witch of a wife isn’t around because he’s so much nicer. I feel certain he would never have hit his son the way she did over the burned bread. But why has he come to see me?

The baker sits awkwardly on the edge of one of the plush chairs. He’s a big, broad-shouldered man with burn scars from years at the ovens. He must have just said goodbye to his son.

He pulls a white paper package from his jacket pocket and hands it out to me. I open it and find cookies. These are a luxury we can never afford.

“Thank you,” I say. The baker’s not a very talkative man in the best of times, and today he has no words at all. “I had some of your bread this morning. My friend Gale gave you a squirrel for it.” He nods, as if remembering the squirrel. “Not your best trade,” I say. He shrugs as if it couldn’t possibly matter.

Then I can’t think of anything to else, so we sit in silence until a Peacekeeper summons him. He rises and coughs to clear his throat. “I’ll keep an eye on the little girl. Make sure she’s eating.”

I feel some of the pressure in my chest lighten at his words. People deal with me, but they are just genuinely fond of Prim. Maybe there will be enough fondness to keep her alive.

My next guest is also unexpected. Madge walks straight to me. She is not weepy or evasive, instead there’s an urgency about her tone that surprises me. “They let you wear one thing from your district in the arena. One thing to remind you of home. Will you wear this?” She holds out the circular gold pun that was on her dress earlier. I hadn’t paid much attention to it before, but now I see it’s a small bird in flight.

“Your pin?” I say. Wearing a token from my district is about the last thing on my mind.

“Here, I’ll put it on your dress, all right?” Madge doesn’t wait for an answer, she just leans in and fixes the bird to my dress. “Promise you’ll wear it into the arena, Katniss?” she asks. “Promise?”

“Yes,” I say. Cookies. A pin. I’m getting all kinds of gifts today. Madge gives me one more. A kiss on the cheek. Then she’s gone and I’m left thinking that maybe Madge has really been my friend all along.

Finally, Gale is here and maybe there is nothing romantic between us, but when he opens his arms I don’t hesitate to go into them. His body is familiar to me – the way it moves, the smell of wood smoke, even the sound of his heart beating I know from quiet moments on a hunt – but this is the first time I really feel it, lean and hard-muscled against my own.

“Listen,” he says. “Getting a knife should be pretty easy, but you’ve got to get your hands on a bow. That’s your best chance.”

“They don’t always have bows,” I say, thinking of the year where there were only horrible spiked maces that the tributes had to bludgeon one another to death with.

“Then make one,” says Gale. “Even a weak bow is better than no bow at all.”

I have tried copying my father’s bows with poor results. It’s not that easy. Even he had to scrap his own work sometimes.

“I don’t even know if there’ll be wood,” I say. Another year, they tossed everybody into a landscape of nothing but boulders and sand and scruffy bushes. I particularly hated that year. Many contestants were bitten by venomous snakes or went insane from thirst.

“There’s always some wood,” Gale says. “Since that year half of them died of cold. Not much entertainment in that.”

It’s true. We spent one Hunger Games watching the players freeze to death at night. You could hardly see them because they were just huddled in balls and had no wood for fires or torches or anything. It was considered very anti-climactic in the Capitol, all those quiet, bloodless deaths. Since then, there’s usually been wood to make fires.

“Yes, there’s usually some,” I say.

“Katniss, it’s just hunting. You’re the best hunter I know,” says Gale.

“It’s not just hunting. They’re armed. The think,” I say,

“So do you. And you’ve had more practice. Real practice,” he says. “You know how to kill.”

“Not people,” I say.

“How different can it be, really?” says Gale grimly.

The awful thing is that if I forget they’re people, it will be no different at all.

The Peacekeepers are back too soon and Gale asks for more time, but they’re taking him away and I start to panic. “Don’t let them starve!” I cry out, clinging to his hand.

“I won’t! You know I won’t! Katniss, remember I –“ he says, and they yank us apart and slam the door and I’ll never know what it is he wanted me to remember.

It’s a short ride from the Justice Building to the train station. I’ve never been in a car before. Rarely ever ridden in wagons. In the Seam, we travel on foot.

I’ve been right not to cry. The station is swarming with reporters with their insectlike cameras trained directly on my face. But I’ve had a lot of practice at wiping my face clean of emotions and I do this now. I catch a glimpse of myself on the television screen on the wall that’s airing my arrival live and feel gratified I appear almost bored.

Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, has obviously been crying and interestingly enough does not seem to be trying to cover it up. I immediately wonder if this will be his strategy in the Games. To appear weak and frightened, to reassure the other tributes that he is no competition at all, and then come out fighting. This worked very well for a girl, Johanna Mason, from District 7 a few years back. She seemed like such a sniveling, cowardly fool that no one bothered about her until there were only a few handful of contestants left. It turned she could kill viciously. Pretty clever, the way she played it. But this seems an odd strategy for Peeta Mellark because he’s a baker’s son. All those years of having enough to eat and hauling bread trays around have made him broad-shouldered and strong. It will take an awful lot of weeping to convince anyone to overlook him.

We have to stand for a few minutes in the doorway of the train while the cameras gobble up our images, then we’re allowed inside and the doors close mercifully behind us. The train begins to move at once.

The speed initially takes my breath away. Of course, I’ve never been on a train, as travel between the districts is forbidden except for officially sanctioned duties. For us, that’s mainly transporting coal. But this is no ordinary coal train. It’s one of those high-speed Capitol models that average 250 miles per hour. Our journey to the Capitol will take less than a day.

In school, they tell us the Capitol was built in a place once called the Rockies. District 12 was in a region known as Appalachia. Even hundreds of years ago, they mined coal here. Which is why our miners have to dig so deep.

Somehow it all comes back to coal at school. Besides basic reading and math and most of our instruction is coal-related. Except for the weekly lecture on the history of Panem. It’s mostly a lot of blather about what we owe the Capitol. I know there must be more than they’re telling us, an actual account of what happened during the rebellion. But I don’t spend much time thinking about it. Whatever the truth is, I don’t see the how it will help me get food on the table.

The tribute train is fancier than even the room in the Justice Building. We are each given our own chambers that have a bedroom, dressing area, and a private bathroom with hot and cold running water. We don’t have hot water at home, unless we boil it.

There are drawers filled with fine clothes, and Effie Trinket tells me to do anything I want, wear anything I want, everything is at my disposal. Just be ready for supper in an hour. I peel off my mother’s blue dress and take a hot shower. I’ve never had a shower before. It’s like being in a summer rain, only warmer. I dress in a dark green shirt and pants.

At the last minute, I remember Madge’s little gold pin. For the first time, I get a good look at it. It’s as if someone fashioned a small golden bird and then attached a ring around it. The bird is connected to the ring only by its wind tips. I suddenly recognize it. A mockingjay.

They’re funny birds and something of a slap in the face to the Capitol. During the rebellion, the Capitol bred a series of genetically altered animals as weapons. The common term for them was *mutations,* or sometimes *mutts* for short. One was a special bird called a jabberjay that had the ability to memorize and repeat whole human conversations. They were homing birds, exclusively male, that were released into regions where the Capitol’s enemies were known to be hiding. After the birds gathered words, they’d fly back to centers to be recorded. It took people awhile to realize what was going on in the districts, how private conversations were being transmitted. Then, of course, the rebels fed the Capitol endless lies, and the joke was on it. So the centers were shut down and the birds were abandoned to die off in the wilds.

Only they didn’t die off. Instead, the jabberjays mated with female mockingbirds, creating a whole new species that could replicate both bird whistles and human melodies. They had lost the ability to enunciate words but could still create songs. Not just a few notes, but whole songs with multiple verses, if you had the patience to sing them and if they liked your voice.

My father was particularly fond of mockingjays. When we went hunting, he would whistle or sing complicated songs to them and, after a polite pause, they’d always sing back. Not everyone is treated with such respect. But whenever my father sang, all the birds in the area would fall silent and listen. His voice was that beautiful, high and clear and so filled with life it made you want to laugh or cry at the same time. I could never bring myself to continue the practice after he was gone. Still, there’s something comforting about the little bird. It’s like having a piece of my father with me, protecting me. I fasten the pin onto my shirt, and with the dark green fabric as a background, I can almost imagine the mockingjay flying through the trees.

Effie Trinket comes to collect me for supper. I follow her through the narrow, rocking corridor into a dining room with polished paneled walls. There’s a table where all the dishes are highly breakable. Peeta Mellark sits waiting for us, the chair next to him empty.

“Where’s Haymitch?” asks Effie Trinket brightly.

“Last time I saw him, he said he was going to take a nap,” says Peeta.

“Well, it’s been an exhausting day,” says Effie Trinket. I think she’s relieved by Haymitch’s absence, and who can blame her?

The supper comes in courses. A thick carrot soup, green salad, lamb chops and mashed potatoes, cheese and fruit, a chocolate cake. Throughout the meal, Effie Trinket keeps reminding us to save space because there’s more to come. But I’m stuffing myself because I’ve never had food like this, so good and so much, and because probably the best thing I can do between now and the Games is put on a few pounds.

“At least, you two have decent manners,” says Effie Trinket as we were finishing the main course. “The pair last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages. It completely upset my digestion.”

The pair last year were two kids from the Seam who’s never, not one day of their lives, had enough to eat. And when they did have food, table manners were surely the last thing on their minds. Peeta’s a baker’s son. My mother taught Prim and me to eat properly, so yes, I can handle a fork and knife. But I hate Effie Trinket’s comment so much I make a point of eating the rest of my meal with my fingers. Then I wipe my hands on the tablecloth. This makes her purse her lips tightly together.

Now that the meal’s over, I’m fighting to keep the food down. I can see Peeta’s looking a little green, too. Neither of our stomachs is used to such rich fare. But if I can hold down Greasy Sae’s concoction of mice meat, pig entrails, and tree bark – a winter specialty – I’m determined to hang on to this.

We go to another compartment to watch the recap of the reapings across Panem. They try to stagger them throughout the day so a person could conceivably watch the whole thing live, but only the people in the Capitol could really do that, since none of them have to attend reapings themselves.

One by one, we see the other reapings, the names called, the volunteers stepping forward or, more often, not. We examine the faces of the kids who will be our competition. A few stand out in my mind. A monstrous boy who lunges forward to volunteer from District 2. A fox-faced girl with sleek red hair from District 5. A boy with a crippled foot from District 10. And most hauntingly, a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she’s very like Prim in size and demeanor. Only when she mounts the stage and they asks for volunteers, all you can hear is the wind whistling through the decrepit buildings around her. There’s no one willing to take her place.

Last of all, they show District 12. Prim being called, me running forward to volunteer. You can’t miss the desperation in my voice as I shove Prim behind me, as if I’m afraid no one will hear and they’ll take Prim away. But, of course, they do hear. I see Gale pulling her off me and watch myself mount the stage. The commentators are not sure what to say about the crowd’s refusal to applaud. The silent salute. One says that District 12 has always been a bit backward but that local customs can be charming. As if on cue, Haymitch falls off the stage, and they groan comically. Peeta’s name is drawn, and he quietly takes his place. We shake hands. They cut to the anthem again, and the program ends.

Effie Trinket is disgruntle about the state her wig was in. “Your mentor has a lot to learn about presentation. A lot about televised behavior.”

Peeta unexpectedly laughs. “He was drunk,” says Peeta. “He’s drunk every year.”

“Every day,” I add. I can’t help smirking a little. Effie Trinket makes it sound like Haymitch just has somewhat rough manners that could be corrected with a few tips from her.

“Yes,” hisses Effie Trinket. “How odd you two find it amusing. You know your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts. Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death!”

Just then, Haymitch staggers into the compartment. “I miss supper?” he says in a slurred voice. Then he vomits all over the expensive carpet and falls in the mess.

“So laugh away!” says Effie Trinket. She hops in her pointy shoes around the pool of vomit and flees the room.