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**Holding Out For a Heroine:
Representations of Voice, Silence and Adolescent Girls' Identity
in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction**

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MELODY JULIANNE MAY WILKINSON



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Abstract

Today, teenage girls are told they can do anything. However, this is not reflected in the images they see and the books they read, which often reinforce messages of passivity, weakness, objectification, and undermine the need for girls to develop a strong voice and autonomous sense of self. This thesis explores these issues through an analysis of heroines in Young Adult dystopian fiction. With its popularity and its exaggeration of real-world issues, this literature is in a unique position to address not only wider political and social contexts but also the lack of representation of young girls.

Using developmental psychology as a frame and Girl's Studies as theoretical lens, this thesis analyses two popular Young Adult series. The first, 'The Selection' series by Kiera Cass, offers an example of a passive heroine in the protagonist America Singer. America is a problematic heroine who embodies deep-rooted tropes of passivity and submission to her male counterparts. In contrast, Katniss Everdeen in 'The Hunger Games' trilogy by Suzanne Collins offers a positive example of what it means to find your voice when your world demands your silence.

This thesis has a creative component which seeks to construct a Young Adult dystopian heroine who, like Katniss, is a positive role model of strength and empowerment. However, this heroine is ordinary rather than exceptional, makes mistakes and yet has the courage to fight for herself and others. The Choice specifically addresses many of the themes explored in the exegesis: the toxic effect of the media; the potential for girls to support each other rather than fighting with each other; and the importance of maintaining identity, even if you fall in love.

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41, 63	Fivish's Model of Voice and Silence	Trisha L. Weeks and Monisha Pasupathi 'Autonomy, Identity, and Narrative Construction with Parents and Friends', in <i>Narrative Development in Adolescence</i> , ed. by Kate C. McLean and Monisha Pasupathi (New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 65-91 (p. 71). < https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=511062 > [accessed 3June2017]

‘When will my reflection show who I am inside?’¹ Introduction

She swoons, she faints, she always tries to escape into the one room where the enemy will find her. She stumbles, she cries, she must be carried from danger by the stronger, smarter, emotionally stable male lead. She is the Damsel in Distress. She is the beauty; the one worth saving; the one worth dying for and she has existed since stories have been told and recorded. Given the great strides feminism has made since its birth, one would think that the Damsel in Distress would simply fade from the writer’s list of characters. However, while there are some notable exceptions, she still appears in most media in one form or another. Why does her story continue to speak to audiences? And, more importantly, if she is speaking, and young girls are listening, should she not have something better to say?

The inspiration for this thesis came as I began to navigate the terrifying role of mother, guiding my daughter through the middle school years. With big life changes, decisions about her future, and the inevitability of boys entering the picture, I felt more than a little unqualified. But, as usual, *she* saves the day by proving that she is already smart, strong, kind, hilarious, and beautiful. She is a kick ass goal keeper—diving in mud and onto hard gym floors alike—ripping socks and sporting bleeding legs sliced open by opposing teams’ cleats. And she has already politely rejected a potential suitor by telling him that, while she likes him very much, she is waiting until she is thirteen to date boys because she wants to ‘be a kid for a little while

¹ Matthew Wilder, ‘Reflection’, perf. by Lea Salonga, *Mulan: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack* (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney 1998).

longer'. I have found my hero. But who does she have? What characters can she listen to when navigating the dangerous, confusing trail of the adolescent search for identity? Who can inspire her and show her that she has the power to help others, change the world or even reclaim the word feminism from its status as a derogatory weapon?

My daughter has her Lionel Messi soccer jersey, which she has worn to near invisibility; and her Flash t-shirt—also hanging together by its last stitch; her Marvel school bag and secret stash of Captain America memorabilia. But these heroes, fictional and real alike, are all men. Where are the heroines for her to look up to? Most of her options are either masculine or hyper-sexualized women with unattainable bodies.

Take, for example, the highly popular Marvel franchise. In the first twelve out of the thirteen films released there is only one female hero and she is a supporting character. She is Black Widow. In *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, the character, also known as Natasha Romanov, is portrayed as strong, capable and an equal asset for protecting the world from annihilation. But half way through the film she must be pulled unconscious from the wreck of a bombed-out bunker by the true hero, Captain America.² So even she, one of the most capable women in the world, must be rescued. Not only this, but when she is acting heroic she is dressed in a way that emphasizes her body as sexual—drawing attention to her breasts, slim waist, and petite frame.³ This simultaneously makes her hypersexualized and reinforces an

² *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, dir. by Antony Russo and Joe Russo (Walt Disney Studios, 2014).

³ While the argument could be made that the costume allows for ease of fighting, the zip on the bodice is always low and insinuates easy access to her naked body.

unattainable body image. In this way, she is neither accessible nor fully autonomous, leaving young girls that look up to her with a poor hero.

But does this really matter? After all, my daughter is growing up in a world that tells her she can be anything. So it should not matter that her heroes are all men. But it does matter. In *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, Carolyn Cocca discusses research which confirms that the way men are still overrepresented in the media affects everything from self-esteem to the underrepresentation of women in positions of power.⁴ She writes:

While you do not have to have a perfect demographic match with a fictional character to identify with her or him, seeing someone who looks like you can have a positive impact on self-esteem and seeing no one who looks like you can have a negative impact on self-esteem.⁵

As actress Geena Davis famously states, ‘If she can see it, she can be it.’⁶ Her organization works to increase the representation of strong female role models in the media. In a video on the charity’s website, she states: ‘[N]o matter how much we tell them boys and girls are equal and you can do whatever you want, if they’re not seeing

⁴ ‘Only one-tenth of the seven hundred top-grossing films of 2007–14 had gender-balanced casts or featured girls/women in roughly half of the speaking roles. Women had less than one-third of speaking roles in those seven hundred films— and that includes characters who spoke only one word. The women were almost always younger than the men, almost always white, and almost always heterosexual. Less than one-quarter of the films had a woman or girl as a main character driving the plot. Only about one-quarter showed women working, and those portraying professional work showed women holding about one-seventh of such jobs. [...] Only about one-third of all of the superhero films from 2000 to 2015 pass the three-part “Bechdel-Wallace test:” that there must be (1) at least two female characters (2) who talk to each other (3) about something other than a man. In a sample of mainstream superhero comics with ensemble casts from 1993 to 2013, females were less than one-quarter of the characters and drawn in about one-quarter of the panels.’; Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2016). p. 4. <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=4585044>> [Accessed 1 May 2017].

⁵ Cocca, p. 3.

⁶ Geena Davis, *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media*, <<https://seejane.org/>> [Accessed 10 August 2017].

it, it's not sinking in as well.⁷ While girls are told they can do anything, this is not reinforced in the images they see and the books they read. By the time a girl reaches adolescence, the books she has been reading have already given her the impression she is not as important as the boys. Cocca observes that 'Across thousands of children's books over the last century, females were only about one-third of the characters'.⁸ Not only this, but when she is represented she is consistently portrayed as weak or an object. This will directly affect how much power a girl feels she has:

When an underrepresented group of people is repeatedly reduced to objects, when the narrative's point of view is consistently *at* that group instead of *from* that group, the objectified group's story is not being told, empathy for that group is less likely, and the group's power is subverted.⁹ (Emphasis in original)

Cocca goes on to argue that:

If the constantly repeated story is that women and girls are not leaders, are not working in professional settings, are not agents of their own lives but merely adjuncts to others, and are sometimes not even present at all, [...] it can make it seem as if a world where women and girls are weak and incapable and emotional, and where fewer women and girls are in charge of their own lives and in positions of power, is 'natural' and normal.¹⁰

If girls do not see themselves represented as autonomous agents, they may begin to doubt that they have any power or even that they have anything important to offer to their culture.

⁷ Davis.

⁸ Cocca, p. 4.

⁹ Cocca, p. 5.

¹⁰ Cocca, p. 5.

This is supported in the field of psychology. According to a five-year study published by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, adolescent girls ‘face a crisis or an impasse in their psychological development’.¹¹ This is directly related to the fact that when they are no longer a girl but not yet a woman their ‘psychological health comes into tension with the regeneration of male-voiced societies and cultures’.¹² The study found that girls lose their unique voice between the ages of twelve and seventeen:

Girls [...] were undergoing a sort of psychological foot-binding [...] As girls’ outspokenness or political resistance carried psychological risks, so girls’ psychological resistance or not knowing had political as well as psychological consequences.¹³

The authors of the study compile ‘a century’ of research showing the psychological risks of the adolescent girl. Their study was longitudinal, focusing on the effects of the relational and connection crisis that can hinder girls from growing into women who have strong, influential voices. In order to succeed in a patriarchal world, girls learn not to speak out.¹⁴

Brown and Gilligan’s findings emphasize the developmental need for a girl (or any adolescent) to belong—to find where they fit in the world. They argue that girls reach this developmental stage in a society that remains problematically patriarchal. This forces girls to choose between two courses of action:

¹¹ Lyn Mikel Brown, and Carol Gilligan, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development’, *Feminism & Psychology*, 3.1 (1993), 11-35 (p. 13).

¹² Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, p. 11.

¹³ Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, p. 30.

¹⁴ Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, pp. 31-2.

We found that girls' struggle to hold on to their voices and to stay in genuine relationships with themselves and others in the face of pressure not to know and not to speak [due to a fear of not belonging] leads some girls to risk the open trouble and disruption of political resistance and others to move their strong feelings and thoughts underground.¹⁵

Brown and Gilligan found that while some girls maintained their sense of voice and autonomy, they had to sacrifice relationships with others in order to do so. If they chose silence they were able to maintain relationship but did not feel they were being authentic and lost their sense of self.

Brown and Gilligan's conclusion is very hopeful in that, if we can reach girls at this age, help them to stay connected (mainly to each other and older women in their lives) and psychologically healthy, they will be able to be the voice resisting the very culture that is keeping them silent. 'In this sense, the psychological development of girls may present, in each generation, an opportunity for resistance which is of considerable societal and cultural significance.'¹⁶

It is clear from this important study that the adolescent years are crucial for the development of a healthy and positive self-image and the development of an individual voice that will be able to speak out on any issue, large or small. Given the critical nature of these years, it is vital to understand where contemporary teenagers are getting messages about who they are or who they should be. There is a plethora of research and information on the saturation of our youth in the media. Laura Choate offers a useful summary:

¹⁵ Brown, 'Meeting at the Crossroads', p. 14.

¹⁶ Brown, 'Meeting at the Crossroads', p. 31.

...11-17 year olds spend more than 11 hours per day on media (television, movies, computers, gaming devices) [and] eighty one percent of 13-17 year olds use social media sites with Facebook being the most popular by far (77 percent), followed by Twitter (24 percent) and Instagram (11 percent [...]) And we know that the more immersed a girl becomes in popular culture through her media use, the more likely she is to adopt the media's cultural standards for herself.¹⁷

Choate's research highlights that girls are being bombarded with messages that continue to undermine their growth into healthy, vocal women. The fact that these media sources contain a meager number of women and that the women who do appear 'are still often posed as sex objects in ways in which male characters are not',¹⁸ means that there is an urgent need for positive representations of women for young girls. Cocca writes of the need to change the message: 'the repetition of inequalities in fiction as in other areas of life are unacceptable and can and must be changed'.¹⁹ This thesis aims to make a contribution to this task through an examination of Young Adult fiction.

There is something fundamental to our development that we acquire through reading. This is confirmed by Janet Alsop in her discussion of the importance of reading fiction and its effect on the brain. She summarizes research that shows that there is a correlation between the amount of fiction people read and their increased

¹⁷ Laura H. Choate, *Swimming Upstream: Parenting Girls for Resilience in a Toxic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015) pp.5-6. <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=2198495>> [accessed 6 June 2017].

¹⁸ Cocca, p. 3.

¹⁹ Cocca, p. 5.

ability to empathize with others. More importantly for my purpose, Alsop discusses the significance of what adolescents read:

[P]erhaps for adolescent readers experiencing rapid emotional, social, and cognitive growth, this connection [between reading fiction and empathy and understanding of social issues] may be even stronger, [...] reading books which accurately reflect the richness and complexity of their lives may help them understand their world, others, and ultimately themselves more fully.²⁰

Her conclusion confirms that there is an urgent need for research on Young Adult novels and their effect on young readers:

[Adolescents'] identities are constructed within a vortex of media texts and images designed to influence their thinking [...] I can think of no better time to give a teenager a YA novel.²¹

Given the wide range of Young Adult fiction available, it was necessary for me to narrow my focus to a particular genre so that I could undertake in-depth and rigorous analysis. My chosen genre is Young Adult dystopian fiction. First, because of its current popularity—in many ways it can be argued that it is the genre of the moment. Young Adult dystopian books such as *The Maze Runner* and *Divergent* have dominated the best seller lists and have had their own film series spin offs. Other books like *Matched* and *The Uglies*, while they have not been made into films, have been extremely popular. Second, I selected this genre because the dystopian world

²⁰ Alsop, Janet, 'More than a "Time of Storm and Stress": The Complex Depiction of Adolescent Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels', in *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature*, ed. by Crag Hill (New York: Routledge, 2014) 25-37 p. 35. <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/reader.action?docID=1644424&ppg=44>> [accessed 4 July 2017].

²¹ Alsop, p. 35.

allows for a plot driven examination of current political, cultural and environmental issues in an exaggerated form. As Frauke Matz summarizes, dystopias are:

fictional places [that] are always versions of the contemporary world, still recognizable to the current audience, but featuring negative developments concerning the (global) political, economic and ecological situation [...] which might escalate if nothing is done to counteract them. They serve as criticism, even as warning, to their readers in order to create awareness and to act against these dangers.²²

These dystopian worlds provide fertile ground for the activist (and specifically, in recent works, girls) to grow up and change the world.²³ Not only can these texts serve as a stage for young girls to see themselves represented, but the texts can also provide the opportunity for young girls to engage with current political and social issues and, perhaps, be inspired to take up their own cause.

Based on the above-mentioned criteria, I chose two series that offer two different types of heroines. The first, ‘The Selection’ series by Kiera Cass, offers a perfect example of what I call the passive heroine in the protagonist America Singer. This model completely undermines the messages we are trying to give our young women: that they have the power to affect positive change on the world around them, and they do not need to wait to be rescued. I analyse America as a negative example of a damaging, outdated role model. The second heroine I explore is Katniss

²² Frauke Matz ‘Alternative Worlds - Alternative Texts: Teaching (Young Adult) Dystopian Novels’, *Learning with Literature in the EFL Classroom* (Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2015), pp. 263-80 (pp.264-265). <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=2011004>> [accessed 6 July 2017].

²³ I use the term activist loosely. While it is extremely important for young girls to use their voices to speak about political and social issues, their passions may lead them elsewhere. I believe that a girl can be an ‘activist’ wherever she is. As long as she can be authentic to her own unique personality she will have power in whatever sphere of influence she occupies.

Everdeen in the ‘Hunger Games’ trilogy by Suzanne Collins. Katniss offers a positive example of what it means to find your voice when your world demands your silence.

In my analysis of these texts I will be using the lens of feminist studies and, in particular, the emerging field of Girls’ Studies.²⁴ Elline Lipkin describes this relatively new form of academic research as one which ‘specifically considers the experience of gendering girls, starting at the earliest moments of their lives and continuing into their transformation to young women’.²⁵ By approaching my chosen texts from this theoretical perspective, I will explore both the toxic and the medicinal impact these heroines can have on a new generation of feminists. As Lipkin states: ‘Educators and critics all agree that the stereotypes presented [to girls] are crucial, if not crushing, in forming understandings of gender and cultural expectation.’²⁶ Girls need heroes that they can identify with, and be inspired by, while they are discovering who they are and deciding where they fit in their world.

In addition to these theories I will be using, as a framework, the developmental theories of Erik Erikson. He posits that,

each stage of life has its own ‘psychosocial’ task, a crisis that needs resolution
[...] In adolescence, the task is to synthesize past, pres-ent, [sic] and future

²⁴ Most theorists point to Mary Pipher with her work *Reviving Ophelia* and the Brown and Gilligan study mentioned above as the departure point where Girls’ Studies started to take its own shape apart from Women’s Studies. Pipher’s work coincides with Brown and Gilligan’s; she discusses girls ‘losing themselves’ (Pipher, Mary, *Reviving Ophelia* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1994), p. 20.) Her book is a comprehensive look at the pressures that force girls into this disappearance. Elline Lipkin’s work springboards off of Pipher’s (and other’s) groundwork. While *Reviving Ophelia* was written in the early nineties, in a 2004 interview, Pipher concludes that while some things have changed, much has changed for the worse and the result is still the same: Girls are still at high risk of sexual assault and ‘girls are still struggling with eating disorders and self-image problems with the same level of intensity.’; Lori Lund, ‘Interview with Mary Pipher, PhD’, in *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 14.3-4 (2002), pp. 113-22 (p. 114)
<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1300/J086v14n03_07> [accessed 10 August 2017].

²⁵ Elline Lipkin, *Girls’ Studies: Seal Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2009), p. 4.

²⁶ Lipkin, p. 126.

possibilities into a clearer sense of self. [...] Erikson called this quest [...] the adolescent's 'search for identity'.²⁷

In using developmental psychology as the frame and Girl's Studies as the theory, I aim to show that not only are Young Adult dystopian heroines important but that the way they are presented should be carefully considered. As Ariane Balizet highlights:

[A] girl's body is hardly peaceful to inhabit. Girls may be encouraged to excel at soccer and express themselves through fashion or social media, but they are still 'bait and targets' within a social economy of sexualized, fetishized young bodies. Denying this disheartening point is not an option.²⁸

Adolescent girls are forming their identities and if they are going to grow into strong, influential and resilient women then the identities that they 'try out' must be worthy enough to support their own unique passions, dreams and voices. Especially if they are to affect the kind of change that dystopian texts ask of them.

²⁷ David G. Myers, *Exploring Psychology*, 4ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 1999), p 103.

²⁸ Ariane M. Balizet, 'Just Say Yes: Shakespeare, Sex, and Girl Culture', *Women's Studies* 44.6 (2015), 815-41 (p. 822)
<<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=108756858&site=ehost-live>> [accessed 1 March 2017].

Chapter One

‘Tale as old as time’:¹ The Fairy Tale’s Enduring Promise of Happiness

And they lived happily ever after.²

A common refrain from parents when asked about aspirations for their children is, ‘I don’t care, as long as they are happy.’ While it may be true, when sipping cups of coffee, sitting in a circle around toddlers teetering on chubby legs, it becomes less true on the side-lines of soccer games or in discussions of deficiencies in report cards, where qualities like perseverance, collegiality, creativity, and independence start to be regarded as indispensable attributes. The sheer joy of our child’s arrival in the world is replaced inch by inch by a growing panic that they will not reach the heights that their unique talents merit. And along with every other lofty hope, we still want to see them love—preferably with as little damage to their hearts as possible. We hope for more than what we have; we hope that our own broken hearts were just an anomaly—we hold out hope for their happy ending. But ‘happily ever after’ is no longer seen as enough when juxtaposed with the challenges and joys of a reality that constantly involves growth and change.

Tellingly, some scholars warn of the limitations of a life road map where the happily ever after of marriage is seen as the destination point for young girls. Writing

¹ Alan Menken, and Howard Ashman, ‘Beauty and the Beast’, perf. by Angela Lansbury, *Beauty and the Beast: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, (Burbank, California: Walt Disney, 1991).

² Par Madame de Villeneuve, ‘Beauty and the Beast’, in *The Blue Fairy Book*, ed. by Andrew Lang Kindle Edition ([n.p.], [n. pub.], 2012) pp.73-88 (p. 88).

of the narrative that fosters this perception, the fairy tale, Marcia Lieberman argues that:

Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls.³

Having dreams, hopes and fantasies are part of a healthy early childhood and fairy tales are an integral part of growing up. Aspirations and dreams are meant to be grand, but fairy tales romanticize the reduction of these dreams. Lieberman writes:

These stories focus upon courtship, which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life [...] because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself. When fairy tales show courtship as exciting, and conclude with marriage, and the vague statement that 'they lived happily ever after,' children may develop a deep-seated desire always to be courted, since marriage is literally the end of the story.⁴

Distressingly, for girls, these narratives limit their dreams to one. Not only this, the stories encourage inferiority, which means that not only will girls remain unequal to boys but they may well see this as ideal.

³ Marcia R., Lieberman, "“Some Day My Prince Will Come”": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale', *College English*, 34.3 (1972), 383-95 (p. 4)
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journal/collegeenglish>> [accessed 1 August 2017].

⁴ Lieberman, p. 13.

Erik Erikson confirms this in his theory of development. Dreams and fantasies play an integral role in the ‘play age’ or the crisis of ‘Initiative vs Guilt’.⁵ Erikson posits that in order to reach maturity a person must navigate eight stages of development, each of which he terms a crisis.⁶ But there is a catch to this process: launching into each developmental stage requires a successful navigation of the previous crisis. A child should emerge from each stage having a new ‘strength’; if they do not, a ‘pathology’ is developed.⁷ Before a teenager can begin to traverse the crisis of ‘Identity vs Role Confusion’ they must first have gained the basic strengths: ‘Hope, Will, Purpose,’ and, most recently, ‘Competence’, having survived the crisis of ‘Industry vs Inferiority’.⁸ If this stage is unsuccessfully navigated, the pathology that develops is ‘inertia’.⁹ Sunil Batra articulates the crisis:

She must learn the ways by which she may ensure her own survival and the survival of those who she may learn to provide for. This sense of Competence provides the ground plan for an emerging understanding of ‘work’ and of its role in one’s culture. This strength also depends for its growth on its precursors, the elements of Hope, Will and Purpose. Where a sense of Purpose and Industry are not nurtured, the child may find herself in a state of

⁵ Sunil Batra, ‘The Psychosocial Development of Children: Implications for Education and Society — Erik Erikson in Context’, *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 10.2 (2013), 249-78 (p. 258) <<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/abs/10.1177/0973184913485014>> [accessed 15 August 2017].

⁶ Batra, pp. 256-7.

⁷ Batra, p. 257.

⁸ Batra, p. 258.

⁹ Batra, p. 258.

loss and weakness of mind, manifested as a sense of inertia where nothing appears to matter or seem to be of any importance.¹⁰

There are echoes of this in Brown and Gilligan's work, which was more fully explored in the Introduction. Brown and Gilligan argue that not only do these girls experience loss of voice and identity, but they simultaneously 'are saying nothing is being lost or at least nothing of value'.¹¹ The crisis is so profound that girls, who are experiencing this loss, convince themselves they are not losing anything important. This is usually because they have lost their sense of agency but have gained a relationship—often with a boy. At the same time, media and literature confirm that a heteronormative relationship is the ultimate goal, which reinforces the idealization of this loss of voice. It is easy to see, then, why voice might be sacrificed to the promise of ultimate happiness.

In order to interrogate the loss of voice and identity, it is necessary to examine the stage of development that occurs before adolescence. What happens when a girl is navigating the crisis of 'Industry vs Inferiority' and she is presented with a picture of happiness from a fairy tale? Marcia Lieberman distils the most popular stories down to this:

The stories reflect an intensely competitive spirit: they are frequently about contests, for which there can be only one winner because there is only one

¹⁰ Batra, pp. 249–78.

¹¹ Carol Gilligan, Annie G. Rogers and Deborah L. Tolman, *Women, Girls, & Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance* (New York: Harrington Park, 1991), p. 26.

prize. Girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky.¹²

According to Erikson, children want to learn, imagine and succeed in the school age. They will compare themselves to others and feel inferior if they are not as competent as their peers.¹³ Yet popular fairy tales tell girls that success has nothing to do with achievement. Instead the ultimate goal is being chosen, and to be chosen a girl ‘does not have to show pluck, resourcefulness, or wit; she is chosen because she is beautiful’.¹⁴ According to this paradigm, a sense of achievement is totally beyond a young girl’s control. She must wait to be chosen in order to have achieved anything. And because the ultimate destination in this narrative and social paradigm is marriage, this becomes the sum of who she is. Simone de Beauvoir claims that this is what perpetuates inequality:

Far from destining herself to man because she thinks she is inferior to him, it is because she is destined for him that, in accepting the idea of her inferiority, she constitutes it.¹⁵

Raising girls on a diet of princesses is perpetuating their inferiority.¹⁶ These stories limit psychosocial development. They romanticize staying in a state of inferiority.

¹² Lieberman, p. 385.

¹³ Batra, p. 264.

¹⁴ Lieberman, p. 386.

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 358.

¹⁶ ‘To call princesses a “trend” among girls is like calling Harry Potter a book. Sales at Disney Consumer Products, which started the craze six years ago by packaging nine of its female characters under one royal rubric, have shot up to \$3 billion, globally, this year, [2006] from \$300 million in 2001. There are now more than 25,000 Disney Princess items. [...] it is not only the fastest-growing brand the company has ever created; they say it is on its way to becoming the largest girls’ franchise on the planet.’; Peggy Orenstein, ‘What’s Wrong With Cinderella?’, *New York Times Magazine*, 6.34 (2006) p. 36<<https://search-proquest->

Lieberman states, ‘Most of the heroines in *The Blue Fairy Book* [...] are entirely passive, submissive, and helpless.’ She gives as examples:

Sleeping Beauty, who lies asleep, in the ultimate state of passivity, waiting for a brave prince to awaken and save her. [...] Snow White [...] who lies in a death-like sleep, [...] until a prince comes along and falls in love with her. Cinderella [who] can remain quietly at home; the prince’s servant will come to her house and discover her identity.¹⁷

When the girl is chosen, it is by the ‘superior’ person who loves her and has chosen her out of all of the other inferior girls, while she waits passively or even sleeps.

The consequences of this are threefold. First, because the superior man chooses her and, in some cases saves her, she is indebted to him. She must feel grateful to have been chosen, and remains second-class to the man, because she has done nothing to earn this. Second, she may become an agent in her own subjugation because the goal is inferiority. Third, the very nature of the competition, to be the fairest, breeds distrust between girls. As Brown posits, girls tend to follow a ‘heterosexual script which privileges romance with boys over friendships with girls, and which places girls in competition for boys, and sets them up against other girls.’¹⁸ In fact, Brown finds that adolescent girls fighting can be condensed down to this very frightening conclusion:

com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/215548600?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 15 July 2017].

¹⁷ Lieberman, pp. 388-9.

¹⁸ Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfighting Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 145<<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=865531>> [accessed 23 February 2017].

Girls against girls. It now seems to have everything to do with heterosexual romance, with boys. [...] But this privileging of romance and desire for boys' love and attention depends on swallowing whole negative stereotypes of girls and women and calling them reality. It depends on girls separating from passionate friendships and love for girls in order to be seen as normal and natural. It depends on girls' insecurity and mistrust of other girls. It depends on self-editing and performing a certain kind of girl.¹⁹

The fairy tale firmly establishes pitting girls against each other by reducing them to stereotypes tightly controlled by beauty. The ugly girl is evil and the beauty is good.²⁰ Lieberman writes, 'This pattern, and the concomitant one of reward distribution, probably acts to promote jealousy and divisiveness among girls.'²¹

Kiera Cass's popular series 'The Selection'—which includes three books, *The Selection*, *The Elite*, and *The One*—illustrates just how pervasive the tropes of fairy tales continue to be in narratives targeting young adult girls.²² In an interview with USA today, Cass declared that '*The Selection* reads more like a fairy tale, and that was the original intent.'²³ The first novel in the series made it to number one on the New York Times Best Seller list. It is marketed to young adults who are supposed to be navigating Erikson's stage of development: 'Identity vs Role Confusion'. In this

¹⁹ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 149.

²⁰ Lieberman, p. 385.

²¹ Lieberman, p. 385.

²² In addition to these three books, Cass has written several novellas and two additional novels, about other characters, which are not discussed here. When referring to 'The Selection' series I will signal this through the use of inverted commas. If the first volume in the series is being referenced, it will be italicised. The actual contest will appear as *The Selection*.

²³ Joyce Lamb, 'Interview: Kiera Cass, author of 'The One'', *Happy Ever After*, <<http://happyeverafter.usatoday.com/2014/05/05/kiera-cass-interview-the-one/>> [Accessed 10 August 2017].

stage they have a ‘desire to locate oneself in a social context.’²⁴ They are putting together what they learned in the previous stages of development in order to answer the question: Who am I? If they are unable to do this, and consequently lack a sense of self-worth, they run the risk of developing ‘pathological tendencies of Withdrawal, Self-Doubt, Inferiority and Isolation.’²⁵ Books like those in ‘The Selection’ reinforce these pathologies. My analysis of this series is significantly shorter than the analysis of the ‘Hunger Games’ trilogy that follows in the next chapter because Cass’s story is one dimensional. Cass produces a problematic heroine who subscribes to the most toxic of fairy tale tropes and, rather than challenging these ideas, Cass presents them as the prescription for happiness. Indeed, one does not have to look very far to see the threads of familiar narratives: a Prince, palaces, girls chosen based solely on their looks (initially) fostering resentment and division, and a contest where the reward is a marriage to the rich Prince.

‘The Selection’ is the story of America Singer. She lives in a dystopian future (the former USA—now called Illèa—destroyed by war with China) divided into a caste system and ruled by a monarchy. The system only caters to the needs of the top three out of the eight castes. The rich have normal, comfortable lives—even in this new world of war. The lower castes suffer great poverty and serve the rich; they do not have access to privileges like birth control so they have too many mouths to feed and not enough food to feed them.

The Prince, Maxon, has come of age, so in true fairy tale fashion, he must find a wife. According to tradition, there is a lottery for girls across the Kingdom. Thirty-

²⁴ Batra, p. 266.

²⁵ Batra, p. 272.

five girls will be chosen at random to participate in what they call The Selection. (It is not random but the public believes it is random.) In true *Bachelor* fashion, The Prince must date them all in order to find his true love.

At first it appears that, in *The Selection*, Cass will subvert the traditional princess role. In brief moments, America is portrayed as strong and independent, refusing to ‘change everything about [her] to cater to some guy.’²⁶ And later, when the palace is suffering an attack from the rebels, America remains calm and assists with pulling down the steel covers for the windows, then proceeds to bolster the crying, weaker girls.²⁷ However, she is only depicted as strong in comparison to the other girls in the competition. This serves not to make America strong but to normalize the isolation of young teenage girls from each other. And, most distressingly, this strength is portrayed as a character flaw when America is measured against the men in her life. This is the problem with the perpetuation of this new fairy tale princess: she has no worth apart from her beauty and, even more sinister, she has no worth unless she is chosen by the Prince. Her worth is vicarious.

‘Someday I’ll be part of your world’:²⁸ Destined for Marriage

When we meet America she has just received the letter inviting her to apply for the lottery to compete in The Selection. She is resolute in her determination not to participate, even though it will help her family to put food on the table. She will earn

²⁶ Kiera Cass, *The Selection* Kindle Edition (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012), p. 90.

²⁷ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 150.

²⁸ Alan Menken, and Howard Ashman, ‘Part of Your World’, perf. by Jodi Benson, *The Little Mermaid: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, (Burbank, California: Walt Disney, 1989).

money during the process and, if she gets to the final five, she will elevate their caste from a Five to a Two. She holds her own in her discussion with her mother, who begs her to take the chance. She is respectful but firm. It seems she may have a voice—even if that voice may lean toward the selfish. But readers discover that her disinclination to participate stems from the fact that she has already fallen in love with Aspen and that she has no ambition other than to marry him:

His black T-shirt was torn to threads in several places, just like the shabby pair of jeans he wore almost every day. If I could only patch them up for him.

That was my great ambition. Not to be Illèa's princess. To be Aspen's.²⁹

This is disappointing for readers in search of a pro-active heroine not because America is in love, but because she has no goals apart from that love. Peggy Orenstein discusses how feminism can be terrifying if it seems as if it is asking girls to give up something—prescribing that they should not want love and children. But many women do desire these things. Orenstein articulates the dichotomy of third-wave feminism while discussing her hopes for her daughter. She contends that sometimes the message of feminism can sound like a threat:

Step out of line, and you end up solo or, worse, sailing crazily over a cliff to your doom. Alternatives like those might send you skittering right back to the castle. And I get that [...] though I want my daughter to do and be whatever she wants as an adult, I still hope she'll find her Prince Charming and have

²⁹ Cass, *The Selection*, p.15.

babies, just as I have. Preferably, one who loves and respects her and also does the dishes and half the child care.³⁰

In searching for a heroine for young girls it is not that love and marriage should be excised from the narrative, it is that the options open to women should not be restricted to this script. What is so limiting about ‘The Selection’ is that America is not on a journey of self-discovery in which she discovers her own agency and identity, but a journey of discovery of who she is in relation to the men in her life.

Cass constantly presents America as inferior to the men in her life. She perpetually portrays America as a child in romantic scenes: ‘[Aspen’s] legs were propped open wide, so I sat sideways between them like a kid who needed cradling.’³¹ Cass establishes the roles clearly; of one stronger and one weaker—one holding and one being held ‘like a kid’. Not only is it disturbing to romanticize a child-adult relationship but, if a young girl buys into this picture, it may stall her psychosocial development in a previous stage.

America has no ambition other than staying in this happy, romantic, inferior state. She tells the reader again, just in case we missed it the first time: ‘But know that I don’t want to be some princess. All I want is to be [Aspen’s] wife.’³² America has found her dream. It is not as if she has nothing else to offer the world; in fact, her last name, Singer, is not arbitrary but indicates her family’s job within the caste system. They are talented singers, musicians and artists. Her brother has made a significant income with his talent as a sculptor. Most agree that America has the most

³⁰ Orenstein, p. 38.

³¹ Cass, *The Selection*, p.14.

³² Cass, *The Selection*, p. 21.

talent in the family, she plays multiple instruments and sings, and she brings in the most money.³³ Her ambitions and dreams could include her talents, yet she is willing to give up everything, join Aspen in a lower caste, and work as a servant.³⁴ Marriage is the ultimate goal and not even a contest to marry a Prince will stand in her way.

Even though her determination is directed towards something reductive, it is still determination; it is still an example of a heroine using her voice. However, Cass continues to undercut America's autonomy. In the end, it is for Aspen's sake, not hers or even her family's, that she decides to participate in *The Selection*. She cedes the decision to the male in her life:

‘And I love you.’ He kissed me slowly to make his point. ‘And if you love me, you’ll do this so I won’t go crazy wondering what if.’ When he made it about him I didn’t stand a chance.³⁵

The first decision America makes is based on the voice and needs of the boy she loves. And it is not just that she feels the need to submit to his desires, his opinions shape her very identity:

His voice was so sincere, and for a minute I did feel sure. Not because I had answers, but because I had Aspen. If I ever lost sight of who I really was, I knew he’d be there to guide me back.³⁶

de Beauvoir articulates that this is a way for a girl who already feels inferior to attain worth: ‘In fact, she will not gain value in the eyes of males by increasing her human

³³ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 26; America makes the most money except for Kota, who makes more than she does but he refuses to help the family in any way.

³⁴ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 19.

³⁵ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 21.

³⁶ Kiera Cass, *The Elite*, Kindle Edition (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), p. 131.

worth, but by modeling herself on their dreams.³⁷ As the Brown and Gilligan study highlights, ‘[adolescent] girls showed a loss of voice and signs of a struggle to authorize—to lend authority or take seriously—their own experience, their feelings, and thoughts.’³⁸ This is in part due to the fact that adolescence, for girls, is a time where ‘women’s psychological health comes into tension with the [...] male voiced societies and cultures’.³⁹ This passive heroine is content, not only with her lack of voice but, to trust her boyfriend’s assessment of who she is. She is not discovering her identity; she is discovering how she appears to someone else.

‘I walked with you once upon a dream’:⁴⁰ All the Men to the Rescue

Once America is relocated to the palace to become part of The Selection contest, Cass places her heroine in a scene that closely mirrors popular fairy tales. By this stage, despite her resolve to be Aspen’s wife, America is falling in love with the Prince. In order to create a love triangle Aspen has miraculously been given a job as a guard at the palace. America is attending an outdoor event when rebels attack the palace. This has happened before and everyone knows what to do—even America who has survived multiple rebel attacks at this point (and, as we have seen, has maintained a clear head). But this time she freezes when the rebels open fire, and eventually runs into the woods instead of towards the safety of the palace and its guards.

³⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 358.

³⁸ Lyn Mikel M. Brown, and Carol Gilligan, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development’, *Feminism & Psychology*, 3.1 (1993), 11-35 (p. 13).

³⁹ Brown and Gilligan, p.11.

⁴⁰ Jack Lawrence, and Sammy Fain, ‘Once Upon a Dream’, perf. by Mary Costa, and Bill Shirley, *Sleeping Beauty*, (Burbank, California: Walt Disney, 1958).

A reader might forgive her the poor sense of direction, especially in such confusion, but the author makes sure that we know she is a damsel in distress by what happens next. She takes off her shoes to climb a tree and hide. She could have looped them over her arm or tucked them in her dress—anything. Instead, she tosses them away so that the shoes will not lead the rebels to her. This is a partial success because the rebels pass by. However, now she finds herself without any shoes and lost in the woods. So what does she do? Climb back up the tree to figure out where she is? See if there is a water source nearby in case she is lost overnight? Orient herself to the position of the sun? Go and look for her shoes? No. ‘I sat at the base of the tree, legs folded up to my chest, waiting.’⁴¹ As if this is not pathetic enough, she falls asleep. Perhaps this is just a literary device used by Cass to quickly jump ahead in time; or perhaps it is a nod to the ultimate passive heroine—Sleeping Beauty.

America is uninjured apart from some scrapes and unexplainable drowsiness. Her back-up beau, Aspen, finds her. He then picks her up, ‘cradling’ her again, making sure to remind the reader that it is romantic to be inferior.⁴² Despite his injuries (he is limping badly) she lets herself be carried by the boy:

It took nearly an hour of slow, steady tracking to get back to the palace. Even though he was injured, Aspen never let his hold on me slip. In fact, he looked to be enjoying the walk despite the extra labor. I liked it too.⁴³

In order to get the full effect of the romantic rescue, Cass has not only turned her heroine into the most useless person in the incident, but a selfish maiden who allows

⁴¹ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 163.

⁴² Cass, *The Elite*, p. 164.

⁴³ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 166.

herself to be carried by someone who is actually injured. Even if the author desperately wanted her heroine to be rescued, she could have at least made her proactive in some way. Instead, girls may learn that if they are lost, alone and suddenly, stupidly, shoeless for no good reason, they will soon be rescued by a man who wants to carry her healthy body so much, he may damage his already injured leg.

Not only is America rewarded with a romantic rescue and subsequent cradling, but she is sent to the hospital (for very minor scrapes) where she again falls asleep, of course. She awakens to find her Prince worrying over her at her bedside.

‘I didn’t mean to wake you,’ Maxon said in hushed tones. ‘You should go back to sleep.’ [...] He watched me carefully, and I was suddenly very worried about how I looked. I had washed my face and pulled my hair up when I came back, but I was pretty sure I had a pillow imprinted on my cheek.⁴⁴

This one scene undermines any hope of America being a strong role model for young girls. She is entirely passive, rescued from the woods, after making absolutely no attempt to save herself. After displaying very little ‘wit’ or ‘pluck’ she then reminds the reader of her real asset: her beauty.

Lieberman underscores how toxic this sort of passive portrayal is:

Because [in fairy tales] victimized girls [...] are invariably rescued and rewarded, indeed glorified, children learn that [they] can afford to remain meek and need not and perhaps should not strive to defend [themselves].⁴⁵

In *The Elite*, this behaviour is not only rewarded but as Lieberman says, glorified.

Young readers learn that if they want their happy ending they not only ‘can afford to

⁴⁴ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 167.

⁴⁵ Lieberman, p. 390.

remain meek' but perhaps, even if they are not meek, they should adopt this persona in order to get the happy ending they dream of.

**'There is one way to ask her/ It don't take a word/ Not a single word/
Go on and kiss the girl':⁴⁶ Blaming the Victim**

Cass advocates for weakness in the most dangerous way by punishing any show of strength in America. Her most impressive moment occurs when, despite being told by palace staff that she is not to resist if the Prince sexually assaults her, she misunderstands the romance of a secluded moment and knees Prince Maxon in the groin. She wrongly assumes he is about to rape her. There are many possible scenarios that could occur after this, but Cass chooses one of the most problematic. America experiences loss of agency in a profound way and Maxon reacts in anger. While the initial reaction to the pain and taking offense that his intentions were misunderstood is understandable, he only grows angrier at America when he discovers her confusion. Maxon does not explain that he would not hurt her or ask for clarification as to why she felt unsafe—he punishes her, by literally sending her to her room.⁴⁷ This not only reinforces the pernicious child-adult roles for both of them but also, disappointingly, America instantly accepts that she is in the wrong. Worst of all, America believes his rage is completely justified. She describes herself as 'humiliated'⁴⁸ and grateful to be allowed out of her room again: 'Even allowing me to

⁴⁶ Alan Menken, and Howard Ashman, 'Kiss the Girl', perf. by Samuel E. Wright, *The Little Mermaid – An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, (Burbank, California: Walt Disney, 1989).

⁴⁷ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 146.

⁴⁸ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 147.

come down for breakfast showed a hint of kindness in Maxon I hadn't been expecting.⁴⁹ And later, when she explains she was told by the authorities that, during The Selection, he is basically allowed to rape her,⁵⁰ he does nothing to rectify the situation.⁵¹ While he never intended to hurt her, the decision to punish her shows a complete lack of respect for America as a person. Unfortunately, both this and America's subsequent indebtedness is portrayed not as a cautionary tale but as the ideal.

Through America's blundering, Cass's readers are learning to keep silent. And even more horrifying, they learn not to defend themselves because they might risk offending their attacker. This needs to be considered in the light of the current cultural climate surrounding rape. Continuing to bring to the discussion a perception that the victim of sexual assault is in any way to blame—that the intentions or feelings of the perpetrator should be considered—contributes to ongoing 'rape myths' that permeate our society.⁵² In their study, Ellen Cohn, Erin Dupuis, and Tiffany Brown, show that not only do these rape myths continue to be pervasive in our society but they contribute to the tendency to blame the victim. 'Rape myth acceptance was [...] a significant predictor of more attributed responsibility to the victim and less attributed responsibility to the perpetrator.' They also found that,

⁴⁹ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 148.

⁵⁰ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 59.

⁵¹ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 154.

⁵² 'Rape myths are defined as attitudes and false beliefs held about rape that deny or minimize victim injury and/or blame the victims for their own victimization (Burt, 1980; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010).'; Rebecca M. Hayes, Rebecca L. Abbott and Savannah Cook, 'It's Her Fault: Student Acceptance of Rape Myths On Two College Campuses', *Violence Against Women*, 22.13 (2016), 1540-55 (p. 2).
<<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801216630147>> [accessed 18 April 2017].

‘Men and women did not differ in their attributions of victim responsibility.’⁵³ If girls are receiving messages from their culture to blame the victim and concurrently read narratives like the one Cass constructs (that they must also consider offending someone when resisting suspected sexual assault) this not only puts them in danger, but makes it less likely that they will speak up about it if the worst happens. Cohn and colleagues’ study confirms ‘that many women are reluctant to report incidents of acquaintance rape because of the tendency to derogate the victim.’⁵⁴ Addressing the nuances of rape culture is important, but Cass’ portrayal is so terrifying because she first cedes all the power and control in the scene to the male and then rewards America’s problematic submission with marriage to the very man who has convinced her that standing up for herself is wrong.

‘Finding you can change / Learning you were wrong’:⁵⁵ Relationship is More Important than Voice

Equally problematic is the series’ emphasis on relationship over voice. A consideration of what strengths each of the girls could offer in the role of princess is

⁵³ Ellen S. Cohn, Erin C. Dupuis and Tiffany M. Brown, ‘In the Eye of the Beholder: Do Behavior and Character Affect Victim and Perpetrator Responsibility for Acquaintance Rape?’, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39.7 (2009), 1513-35 (p. 1529)
<<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00493.x/full>> [accessed 10 June 2017].

⁵⁴ Cohn, p. 1530.

⁵⁵ Menken, ‘Beauty and the Beast’.

only discussed, in any depth, once; and the narrative ends up being the ultimate example of how to take away the heroine's voice.

Near the end of the second book, even though she has not settled on which boy she loves more, America gets angry with the Prince for kissing one of the other girls and decides she will exit the competition 'with a bang'.⁵⁶ All of the girls are to present one philanthropic idea they would like to pursue as future queen. America decides to go on camera and declare that the castes should be dissolved. There is the potential for her to stand up for the disenfranchised and use her voice to change a system that is broken. Unfortunately, she crumbles with the first question—having no idea how to answer the obvious question of 'how'.⁵⁷ She has not done her homework. She has not asked herself any important questions. She had plenty of time and the resources to do both of these things, but she does neither.

The fallout from this is a disaster: Prince Maxon is beaten by his father and America learns the lesson that these matters should be left to the men. If the castes are going to be dissolved then Maxon will be the one to do it. She says, 'I felt ashamed' and spends the rest of the second book apologizing for speaking out against injustice.⁵⁸ She learns to keep her mouth shut. She has negotiated the crisis of 'Autonomy vs Shame' and has emerged with the pathology of 'Inhibition'.⁵⁹ This is a stage of development of an even younger age—ensuring there is even less hope of America achieving a healthy mature identity. Again this is not interrogated as problematic but praised as the ideal, with the reward of an intimate night with

⁵⁶ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 262.

⁵⁷ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 272.

⁵⁸ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 275.

⁵⁹ Batra, p. 258; Children should be achieving this in early childhood (ages one and a half to three years).

Maxon.⁶⁰ He reiterates that she should leave these things to him.⁶¹ Indeed, Maxon takes the punishment, intended for her, in the ultimate gesture of love; she nurses his wounds and continues to apologize.

The effect of the beating has some deeper implications. By punishing Maxon, the King psychologically punishes America as well. To have your actions cause someone you love pain can be the worst kind of torture. However, there is very little discussion of the real villain—the King. Instead, both these characters are now celebrating their relegation to normative hierarchical roles. The dictator is firmly in charge; his son beaten into submission and the girl relegated to a feminine role of silent nurturer. Because Cass presents this moment as merely romantic—the picture of reconciliation after a fight, and the hero’s body sacrificed for the mistakes made by the beautiful damsel—it does not challenge any of the problems that this scene exposes. Both characters are in crisis and both emerge with the psychosocial pathology of ‘inferiority’, but with its shining coat of happiness, it would be difficult for young readers to see the toxicity.

‘All you’re ever gonna be is mean’:⁶² The inevitability of ‘Girlfighting’

According to Erickson, another important part of adolescent development is identifying with a peer group. Lyn Brown agrees, in her book *Girlfighting*, that this is particularly important, yet fraught with danger for girls. She writes:

⁶⁰ Cass, *The Elite*, chap. 29; There is no sex in the scene, or even the attempt, because they both wrongly assume that she will be kicked out of the competition after the rebel attack (they were shut in a bunker alone for safety).

⁶¹ Cass *The Elite*, p. 279.

⁶² Taylor Swift, ‘Mean’, perf. by Taylor Swift, *Speak Now*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Big Machine, 2001).

In a culture that values masculinity and the characteristics that go with it, separating from other girls—separating from an inferior, weak femininity so incapable of attaining real power and control—is the way to gain the power of maleness for themselves.⁶³

The result is often isolation which, as I have shown, Erikson considers a pathology.

Throughout the entire ‘Selection’ series, the focus is on what each girl can offer Maxon the Prince. There is no mention of the girls’ individual strengths, which could have been depicted as an integral part of leading this dystopic country to a brighter future. The books devalue each girl’s innate worth as an individual and only give them value as an addendum to the Prince’s life and needs. In one scene, near the end of the second book, the Prince justifies keeping his options open after he has fallen in love with America.

‘And then Kriss came to me, so very humble, only wanting to see me happy [...] I knew she was nice, and she’s very attractive; [...]I can depend on Kriss and I know without question she is devoted to me.’⁶⁴

The Prince continues when describing the other girl in the running:

‘And Celeste. She is very influential, a celebrity [...] It looks good on TV. It sounds right for someone who is close to being on the same level as me to be my final choice. I like her if only for her tenacity. [...] I know when she holds me, it’s the crown she pulls close to her heart [...] She’s using me so I don’t feel guilty about using her.’⁶⁵

⁶³ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 291.

⁶⁵ Cass, *The Elite*, p. 294.

This sort of story continues to perpetuate ‘the ideal of white femininity, perfect for getting and keeping a prince [...] girls are objects to own or cheerleaders to boys’ adventures.’⁶⁶ Cass makes the entire point of the girls’ existence about what the boy needs in order for him to rule the world. And all he seems to need is a cheerleader. The girls are inferior to him and only gain value through his choice. They are not competing with skill or intellect for the job of princess, but solely for the affection of the Prince. This places not just the heroine, but all of the girls, in a perpetual state of inferiority.

Not only does Cass make girls competing against each other for male attention the entire premise of the story, she chooses not to subvert it, but rather reinforces current cultural standards that pit women against each other. For example, in true fairy tale fashion, Celeste is so jealous of America’s dress, she rips it forcing her to change.⁶⁷ In addition to this, Cass continues to perpetuate the typical ways in which women judge each other, offsetting America against stereotypical girls. I would categorise Celeste as the *bitch*; Kriss as the feminine supportive *nurturer*, and Natalie as the swooning *crybaby*. In *Girlfighting*, Brown critiques a range of popular television shows, but her analysis applies here:

But even the few shows with strong girl characters feed stereotypes of girls and gender relations[...]While the girls in these shows may be smart, adventurous, and brave, up to the challenges before them, these qualities distinguish them from excessive (annoying, petty, weak) femaleness.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 22.

⁶⁷ Cass, *The Selection*, p. 239

⁶⁸ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 33.

So, even if the heroine is strong (Which America is not, but the reader is meant to see her as strong in comparison to the other girls' weakness.) she must spend her time and energy fighting, or comparing herself to, other girls in the competition. In that way, the books are a perfect example of what Brown calls 'policing' in which girls judge and fight each other so much they become distracted from the very issues that oppress them.⁶⁹ Again, this could be a chance for Cass to comment on, or critique, this tendency, but instead she normalizes it; the bickering and mistrust among the girls is justified. They all want to marry the Prince so of course they will fight each other. While Cass does manage to have the girls get along and forge some form of friendships, the undercurrent of distrust is pervasive because winning the hand and heart of the boy is paramount.⁷⁰ Cass perpetuates this mistrust and insecurity and in glorifying this, her books are illustrative of a deep problem outlined by Brown:

This form of targeting or scapegoating of people in your same subjugated group is familiar to those who study the psychology of oppression. When girls enact horizontal violence by using negative stereotypes about femininity against other girls, they do so to distance themselves and thus to avoid being victimized by those stereotypes in turn. By joining those with the power to define and enforce such stereotypes, however, they also affirm them as 'Reality' and ensure that these stereotypes live to control and denigrate

⁶⁹ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 142.

⁷⁰ America forms a friendship with a girl named Marlee. But this friendship survives only because, at first, America is not interested in the Prince and when she is, Marlee has fallen in love with someone else. Thus in eliminating the issue of heterosexual romance, both girls live happily ever after with their boys in the end. – Cass, *The Selection*, p. 200.

another generation of girls. In other words, girls become handmaidens to insidious forms of sexism.⁷¹

‘The Selection’ becomes a series of text books for the perpetuation of sexism that continues to oppress girls by normalizing the need to put winning the boy over forging and keeping relationships with other girls.

Often, a discussion about aggression is a discussion about fear. Brown writes, ‘At the heart of potential exclusion are fear and anxiety about not being loved or chosen’.⁷² When all options for achievement are reduced to being chosen, one can understand how terrifying this would feel and fear tends to bring out the worst in everyone involved. In addition to this, girls may feel an internal resistance to the message that they are inferior. However, girls cannot enact this resistance against their superior object of desire—which may risk their ultimate happiness. So instead, they must make themselves feel superior to their competition. Brown argues that girl fighting is just a symptom of the repeated message of inferiority:

Girls’ meanness to other girls is a result of their struggle to make sense of or to reject their secondary status in the world and to find ways to have power and to experience feeling powerful.⁷³

Cass had the opportunity, even if she stuck with the premise of competition for her plot, to not only address the hierarchical construct that encourages fighting but also subvert the expectation of girls fighting. The possibilities of thirty five girls working together are endless; perhaps they could even have overcome an abusive dictator. Instead, Cass reinforces it as inevitable and even romantic. Thus, ‘The Selection’ is

⁷¹ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 149.

⁷² Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 138.

⁷³ Brown, *Girlfighting*, p. 32.

‘educating girls in the heterosexual script. The world turns around what boys desire’ and also reinforces that ‘girls [...] fighting can give them a sense of power, [while doing] little to interrupt sexist stereotypes’.⁷⁴

‘Storybook endings, fairy tales coming true / Deep down inside we want to believe they still do’:⁷⁵ The Problem of Happily Ever After

The happily ever after ending is still part of the DNA of our culture, reinforced by movies, advertising and literature. This ending teaches that heteronormative love and marriage is what will make us happy; rejecting this can feel inevitable but depressing—like learning there is no Santa Claus. But relationships are more than myth. They continue to give our lives meaning. Indeed, Erickson posits that finding ‘Intimacy’ is the strength gained in the successful navigation of the Young Adult (Eighteen to Forty years) stage of development.⁷⁶

Feminism should not be asking girls to give up on love or even the possibility that it contains some magic. This would be just as limiting as our pre-feminist culture and, perhaps, equally depressing. But girls should not have to give up pieces of who they are in order to experience some mystery. Erikson argues that functional relationships require each partner to be fully themselves. Having successfully navigated multiple crises, adolescents should emerge with ‘the capacity to lose one’s own identity [while maintaining] the ability to locate the emerging adult identity without threat or fear of the other’.⁷⁷ Both parties have to own who they are in order

⁷⁴ Brown, *Girlfighting*, pp. 27-28.

⁷⁵ Carrie Underwood, ‘Ever Ever After’, on *Enchanted*, by Stephen Schwartz and Alan Menken (2006).

⁷⁶ Batra, p. 268.

⁷⁷ Batra, pp. 268-9.

to freely give of themselves to each other. If they enter the relationship without all of the pieces of their identity, when they give more of themselves to the relationship, they may eventually feel that there is nothing left.

When America finally gets her happy ending, she is not a whole person. She has not gained any identity apart from the men in her life. In fact, when Maxon proposes, it is an eerie mirror scene from the beginning of the first book.

When he kissed me, I felt my life settle into place. I had found everything I'd wanted—things I didn't even know I was looking for—here in Maxon's arms. And if I had him to guide me, to hold me, then I could take on the world. [...] I saw it in his face. I was home. And I finally found my voice. 'Yes.'⁷⁸

America used the word 'guide' before to describe her relationship with Aspen. And in this scene she 'crawled into Maxon's arms', reinforcing the child-adult tableau that she enacted earlier with Aspen. In addition to this, she says she has found her voice, but it is only to say yes to marriage.

The most terrifying confirmation that America's identity has shifted from one boy to another comes in the epilogue of the final book. She is walked down the aisle by the other corner of her love triangle, Aspen. All has been resolved because he has fallen in love with someone else. Her father has died, so she asks Aspen to walk her down the aisle.

⁷⁸ Kiera Cass, *The One* Kindle edition (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014), p. 316.

Aspen gives me one last smile, and I reach over to kiss his cheek, saying good-bye to so many things. We share a look for a moment, and he takes my hand and puts it in Maxon's giving me away.⁷⁹

Once again, it is the packaging of this very problematic moment that must be considered. The fairy tale dust is sprinkled on the happy couple, complete with words like 'magical'.⁸⁰ They leave no broken hearts (from their love triangle) in their wake and the girl is given, from her first boyfriend to her husband. Not only is this ritual still problematic when the man giving away the bride is the girl's father, but to have the multiple references to infantilizing her culminate in this 'happy' scene is a problem. America has not found her own identity, but remains trapped in a fairy tale dream that starts and ends with marriage. The books end with this: 'This isn't happily ever after. It's so much more than that.'⁸¹ America, however, is less. Jeanne Bubino writes,

The myth of romance is insidious not because it is an illusion—that is, not because it takes us out of the realm of the real and allows us to experience a seemingly transcendent, totalizingly pleasurable feeling—but because it 'idealizes and eroticizes women's powerlessness and lack of freedom.'⁸²

It is not the romance, or even the magic, in this story that is the problem; it is what it idealizes. 'The Selection' has made America's lack of development the ideal.

⁷⁹ Cass, *The One*, p. 323.

⁸⁰ Cass, *The One*, p. 323.

⁸¹ Cass, *The One*, p. 323.

⁸² Jeanne Dubino, 'The Cinderella Complex: Romance Fiction, Patriarchy and Capitalism', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27.3 (1993), 103-18 (p. 116) <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/195367562?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=17287>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

We are all desperate to feel worth. We ask: Why are we here? What do we have to offer the world? Does it matter that I am here? Books like those in ‘The Selection’ series appeal because they give hope to these questions. Unfortunately, they are giving the wrong answers. They are reducing girls further and further to the sum of their body and reiterating that loss of voice is less important than being chosen. But what is the point of speaking if no one hears you? What if everything you have to say is being yelled at the four walls of your room? There is still a valid desire for relationship. If we are going to write about this very human desire for young adults, we must meet them where they are—forming their identities and falling in love—but remind them that they are more than the sum of that love. They have an identity and voice, as do the boys they love, and neither is less important than the other.

Chapter Two

‘I need a hero’:¹ Suzanne Collins’ Katniss Everdeen

In contrast to the passive heroine in ‘The Selection’, Suzanne Collins offers her readers an empowered heroine in the ‘Hunger Games’ trilogy.² Katniss Everdeen is an active heroine who first validates, through shared experience, the loss of the ability to authorize, and then models the behavior to overcome this, as well as ways to find a strong powerful voice that changes her world for the better. In the ‘Hunger Games’ Suzanne Collins interweaves the journey of a relatable character with exemplary qualities with a scathing commentary on a world not so far removed from the one her readers are growing up in. In Katniss Everdeen, Collins creates a character whose experience mirrors that of young girls today but with much higher stakes.

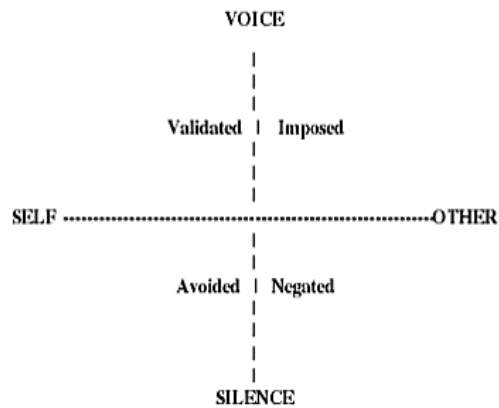
Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s study of the psychological development of young girls, which was discussed in the Introduction, provides an important lens through which to explore Katniss. Brown and Gilligan ‘were surprised to find [that despite possessing advantages in education] evidence of developmental progress goes hand in hand with evidence of loss of voice and struggle to authorize.’³ In the study, they use the term authorize as a way of incorporating all facets of expression of identity. In other words, girls, with no other outward sign of struggle developmentally, still lose their ability to articulate ‘things about themselves, what

¹ Dean Pitchford, and Jim Steinman, ‘Holding Out for a Hero’, perf. by Bonnie Tyler, *Footloose*, (New York City: Columbia, 1984).

² From here on, ‘The Hunger Games’ trilogy will be signified by the use of inverted commas; the first book in the series will be identified by italics; and wherever the actual Games are referenced it will appear as the Hunger Games or Games.

³ Lyn Mikel Brown, and Carol Gilligan, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development’, *Feminism & Psychology*, 3.1 (1993), 11-35 (p. 13).

they felt, thought and desired.’⁴ Brown and Gilligan use the term voice in a way that echoes Fivush’s Model of Voice and Silence where it can be conceptualized as autonomy.⁵ This model incorporates the relationship between one’s self and someone else. It is the direct relationship between speaking and having influence or power.⁶



7

Brown and Gilligan’s longitudinal study allowed them to see ‘the strengths in younger girls’ voices,’ and then ‘witness [...] their struggles and losses over time’.⁸ When the girls enter the study, they are not silent, they have strong voices. They are able to maintain this voice for a brief period, but the loss increases proportionally as they grow up. Even though their culture may present them with equal opportunities

⁴ Elizabeth Iglesias, and Sherry Cormier, ‘The Transformation of Girls to Women: Finding Voice and Developing Strategies for Liberation’, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 30.4 (2002), 259-71 (p. 260) <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/235995604?rfr_id=info%3Aaxri%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 9 September 2016].

⁵ Trisha L. Weeks and Monisha Pasupathi, ‘Autonomy, Identity, and Narrative Construction with Parents and Friends’, in *Narrative Development in Adolescence*, ed. by Kate C. McLean and Monisha Pasupathi (New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 65-91 (p. 71) <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=511062>> [accessed 3 June 2017].

⁶ Weeks and Pasupathi, p. 72.

⁷ Weeks and Pasupathi, p. 71

⁸ Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, p. 14.

for success, the girls ‘are showing evidence of loss, struggle, and signs of an impasse in their ability to act in the face of conflict.’⁹

This progression from voice to silence has direct implications on a young girl’s ability to succeed. If she cannot authorize who she is, what she wants, what she needs to succeed, and, most importantly, resist when she is at risk or encountering injustice, then she is at a disadvantage. Brown and Gilligan conclude that if young girls lose their sense of having a voice, this loss not only has ‘psychological consequences but also [has the] potential to defuse women’s political power.’¹⁰ Through Katniss, Collins captures the complex relationship between voice and silence, but ultimately offers her readers a positive model of a girl who is able to recover her voice in the midst of a world that seeks to silence, package and control her.

Scholars have frequently acknowledged Katniss’ heroic status.¹¹ In ‘Girl Power and Girl Activism’, Sonya Fritz discusses Katniss’ (and other popular heroines’) particular importance to young girls.

What makes this representation of girlhood so powerful for female readers [...] is the way in which it is communicated; [...] the dystopian girl rebel is constructed in these novels through engaging various definitions of girl

⁹ Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, p. 13.

¹⁰ Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, p. 32.

¹¹ See for example: Lily Rothman, ‘The New Age of Heroines.’ *Time*, 183.13 (2014) 52. <<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login.aspx?direct=true&db=heh&AN=95166393&site=ehost-live>>Pipher, Mary, *Reviving Ophelia* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1994)> [accessed 10 June 2017]; Hansen; Oliver, Kelly, ‘Ambiguity, Ambivalence and Extravagance in The Hunger Games’, *Humanities*, 3.4 (2014), 675-86 <<https://doaj.org/article/9a936906d59a4464b06a6c6d74e705f2>> [accessed 2 May 2017].; Tan.

power; a perennial and quintessential rhetoric of girlhood in contemporary culture.¹²

Collins' expert storytelling, as well as layered characterizations, makes Katniss accessible to young readers and thus 'highlights this developmental stage as a particularly important time of empowerment and sociopolitical awareness.'¹³ Susan Shau Ming Tan argues that the world Collins has constructed allows young readers to identify their 'own current culture within the dystopian world of Panem.'¹⁴ Through engaging with Katniss and her world they may find their own 'empowerment and sociopolitical awareness.'¹⁵

Dissenting voices are few, but, Alison Bewley argues that, Katniss lacks the agency [...] scholars have attributed to her. [She] is not truly the subject of her own story at all. Despite her masculine and androgynous traits, her relationships with other characters in the trilogy show that she is an object acted on or against more than she is an actor in her own right. Her narrative role, [...] is not as empowered as popular belief would suggest.¹⁶

Bewley's argument seems to be that Katniss is passive because she struggles against characters and regimes that wish to control her—she is not autonomous. This is problematic on several fronts. First, without conflict, there would be no story.

¹² Sonya Sawyer Fritz, 'Girl Power and Girl Activism in the Fiction of Suzanne Collins, Scott Westerfeld, and Moira Young', in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, ed. by Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014) pp. 17-32 (p. 18).

¹³ Fritz, p. 18.

¹⁴ Susan Shau Ming Tan, 'Burn with Us: Sacrificing Childhood in The Hunger Games', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 37.1 (2013), 54-73 (p. 55) < <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/article/504926> > [accessed 17 June 2017].

¹⁵ Fritz, p. 18.

¹⁶ A. L. Bewley, 'Literary traditions on fire: Mimetic desire and the role of the orphaned heroine in Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games trilogy', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 40.4 (2015), 371-85 (p. 375) < <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/article/603106> > [accessed 23 August 2017].

Second, Katniss would not be representative of her young readers, who struggle to overcome forces that wish to control them. And third, even Bewley herself states:

When it comes to her own survival, Katniss Everdeen is a self-sufficient, independent heroine who does not require a savior. Her androgyny and gender fluidity in the context of survival are potentially empowering to readers as well as to future female heroines.¹⁷

Bewley qualifies this with ‘but only if [...] readers don’t look very closely.’¹⁸ On the contrary, I argue that the deeper her readers look, the more they should be able to see just how remarkable Katniss’ actions are. You cannot be heroic without anything to overcome. In fact, it is these very factors that make Katniss the active hero; for if she did not have to navigate these forces, she would already be free and there would be nothing to fight for. Yet Katniss does have something to fight for, just as her young readers do: a voice.

There are four important ways Collins looks at voice and autonomy. First, Katniss begins to speak through her actions. Second, she is prepared to work within a team, accepting advice and help from those who earn her trust. Third, as she begins to find her voice, she is forced to navigate the pressure to recite someone else’s script. And finally, she finds her voice despite the debilitating effects of trauma.

¹⁷ Bewley, p. 383.

¹⁸ Bewley, p. 383.

‘She’s gotta be strong / And she’s gotta be fast / And she’s gotta be fresh from the fight’:¹⁹ Finding Voice through Action

Katniss lives in a world of oppression. The twelve districts serve the Capitol—sacrificing all of their needs for the luxury the Capitol citizens enjoy. And, in ultimate servitude, once a year the districts must offer up two of their children to fight to the death in a reality television show called the Hunger Games. Tan states, ‘Articulation in Panem is denied—there is no safe or sanctioned space for any expressions of self or identity.’²⁰ In this world where silence is pervasive, Katniss must find her agency. She searches within herself to find the exact pitch and tenor of a voice that will reach out, not only to the country she must save but also to her readers.

In the back story that Collins creates, readers learn that, from a young age, Katniss is aware that things are not right with the world that she inhabits:

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District Twelve, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol.²¹

As a child, she is not afraid to voice her dissent or to ask questions about the way things are. This exemplifies her intelligence and healthy psychological development, as I have already discussed. Katniss used her voice to the fullest. She sang. She sang with her father and she sang with pride on her first day of school. Peeta remembers the moment when he first fell in love with her. ‘[T]he teacher asked who knew the valley song. Your hand shot straight up. She stood you up on a stool and had you sing

¹⁹ Pitchford, ‘Holding Out for a Hero’.

²⁰ Tan, p. 57.

²¹ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, Kindle Edition (London: Scholastic, 2009), p. 6.

it for us.²² Katniss is unafraid; she has something to sing; and she knows her voice is up to the challenge.

Yet, Katniss has become silent. Rather than being something that she has failed to achieve, an authorial voice is something that she has unlearned or rather, learned to ignore. Collins captures this when Katniss says,

So I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. Do my work quietly in school. Make polite small talk in the public market. [...] Even at home, where I am less pleasant. I avoid discussing tricky topics like the reaping, or food shortages, or the Hunger Games.²³

Katniss has clearly not lost her intelligence or even her ability to have an opinion, but she has sent them ‘underground’.²⁴ She has decided that, for the sake of her relationship with her mother, she will choose silence. Not only that, but her songs have been muted as well. Katniss only sings now for the sake of Prim when she is sick.²⁵ However, as Katniss has grown aware of what is at stake when her voice is heard, her silence becomes less about protecting her relationship with her mother and more about survival; just like her young readers who are trying to survive the psychological minefield of adolescence. Collins captures this struggle just as the dystopia is meant to. For Katniss it really is life or death and for her young admirers it can feel like life or death, so the consequence is the same: silence.

When readers first meet Katniss she is silent—she listens to the world around her. She slips with quiet stealth from her family home, careful not to wake her mother

²² Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 301.

²³ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 6.

²⁴ Brown, ‘Meeting at the Crossroads’, p. 14.

²⁵ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 234.

and sister, Prim. She listens for the hum of the electric fence that keeps her and the others of her district in their place. It, like her, is silent.²⁶

Katniss has learned to stay silent for safety's sake. But what is significant is she does not bother speaking, even in the woods, far from listening ears. Her hunting partner and friend, Gale has plenty to say, but she has sent her opinions and knowledge far underground.

His rages seem pointless to me, although I never say so. It's not that I don't agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the wood? It does not change anything. It doesn't fill our stomachs. In fact it scares off the nearby game. I let him yell though. Better he does it in the woods than in the district.²⁷

Gale has not lost his voice entirely; he chooses to speak when he feels the risks are low enough. But Katniss does not see the point. It has no tangible use to her. The only thing that matters to her is survival—of herself and her loved ones.

Katniss is not alone. In her world, everyone is silent as they make their way to the square for the reaping. Her readers learn that this silence must be imperative; for if there was ever a thing someone should speak out against, it would be children killing other children for the amusement of the masses, a gladiator games played by kids. The children are reaped from the districts that are slaves to the excesses of the Capitol and its dictator, President Snow. Readers come to understand that, if having a voice against something so inhumane is a risk, silence must be their only option.

²⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 4.

²⁷ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 14.

Katniss stands silent with rest of the crowd when the unthinkable happens: she hears a name. Not her name, as she had feared, but one that is far worse. It is the one she loves most in the world—her little sister Primrose Everdeen.²⁸

At first she cannot speak. She has trained herself well. She is ‘trying to remember how to breathe, unable to speak.’²⁹ But then she sees Prim’s untucked shirt—she has teased her about it only minutes earlier calling her a ‘little duck’³⁰ and this image pulls her voice from deep inside where she has kept it hidden in order to survive.

‘Prim!’ The strangled cry comes out of my throat, and my muscles begin to move again. ‘Prim!’ [...] I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me. ‘I volunteer!’ I gasp. ‘I volunteer as tribute!’³¹

This first cry emerging from Katniss brings with it the first hints of who Katniss really is. Up until this point she has survived, showing exceptional skill, but now her voice turns outward; we see a girl—who is sure she will not survive the Hunger Games—willing to die for her sister. The hero emerges with a shout and Katniss begins her journey as a role model for young girls precisely because of this strong and tenacious voice.

While Katniss uses her voice here, the impact is from her action. She is acting out her autonomy. She offers the only thing she can in order to save her sister—her life. She has no power in relation to the Capitol—no voice to protest the injustice of sending children to their death for entertainment. But this act of volunteering gives

²⁸ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 20.

²⁹ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 21.

³⁰ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 15.

³¹ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 22.

her the power in the moment. She may not be able to change the Games, but she is deciding who will go. In so doing, she takes the first step towards ‘taking ownership of her [...] choices and their consequences’,³² which Fivush describes as power. The importance of this moment for young readers cannot be overstated. Katniss is faced with injustice and she makes a choice. Instead of addressing everything that is wrong with her world, she does the one thing she has the power to do. She could have just used her voice to yell about the injustice. But this would not have had the same effect. In fact, an outright accusation of the Capitol probably would have ended in her and her loved ones’ executions. Instead, she does the one thing she can do within the confines of the system. She uses her small amount of power to save one person’s life. Young readers learn, then, that sometimes you have to bide your time and appear to play the game by the system’s rules in order to win in the end; all you have to do is look for the flaw—the small loophole that gives you the power.

After her first courageous act, Katniss is faced with an insurmountable challenge—to survive in a Game rigged to kill her. She is mainly silent, again focusing on survival. Her fellow tribute, Peeta, vocalizes a need to make a small stand against the Capitol before he dies. But she will stay silent. She will play by the rules because she promised her sister she will survive.

‘I keep wishing I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their games,’ says Peeta.

‘But you’re not,’ I say. None of us are. That’s how the Games work.’

‘Okay, but within that framework, there’s still you and there’s still me,’ he insists. ‘Don’t you see?’

³² Weeks and Pasupathi, p. 72.

‘A little. Only no offence, but who cares Peeta? [...] Care about what Haymitch said. About staying alive.’³³

Katniss decides that survival is more important than being herself. As Miranda Green-Barteet asserts, Katniss, at this point, only engages in rebellious acts if they are ‘necessary [...] her almost single-minded focus on her survival [...] prevents her from [...] recognizing her own power.’³⁴ She sees Peeta’s need to speak out to ‘show the Capitol [he] is more than a pawn’ as pointless. ‘She does not believe she has the power to evoke larger changes.’³⁵ She sees it as risking her life for no reason.

Katniss is silent for much of the training and ceremonies before the games begin. She chooses to play, again, by the Capitol’s rules. Except, now that Katniss has achieved her first act of autonomy, the next comes more easily. When she is supposed to demonstrate her skill with the bow and arrow to the people producing the games, they ignore her. To get their attention, she shoots an arrow into the apple in the roasted pig’s mouth, narrowly missing them. This act takes one more inch of power back for herself. She still cannot escape the Games, she may not survive, but she will be heard in that moment. She has the power in the room. And, in fact, in the second Hunger Games the organizers are forced to protect themselves from her by building a force field for their viewing platform. They must react to her actions. Katniss does not see this little step of power as significant—except that it may put her in danger.³⁶ However, for her readers it is very significant. She uses her voice in the

³³ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 142.

³⁴ Miranda A. Green-Barteet, “‘I’m beginning to know who I am’”: The Rebellious Subjectivities of Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior’, in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, ed. by Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 33-50 (p. 38).

³⁵ Green-Barteet, p. 39.

³⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 103.

form of an arrow and says that being ignored (which would potentially put her life at even greater risk during the Games) is unacceptable.

The need for survival forces Katniss into silence again. She navigates the Games with stealth and runs from the other tributes until she meets Rue. No one volunteered to take this twelve-year-old's place at the reaping, but she has survived—literally flying through the games—hopping from tree top to tree top avoiding the other predators. Katniss cannot resist making an alliance with the child. The significant thing about this relationship is that Katniss now speaks freely about the injustice of the Capitol. She and Rue discuss openly the conditions they suffer in their respective Districts—something Katniss would never have done before.³⁷ When Rue dies, Katniss chooses to act, knowing full well the significance of what she is doing. She remembers both Gale's ravings in the woods and her argument with Peeta before the games and realizes it is time to speak.

I want to do something right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol. That whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.³⁸

First, she finds her voice in song, just as she did when she was young and confident—she sings Rue to 'sleep'. Then she meticulously covers Rue's body with flowers and gives her the silent three finger salute of respect from her district. These acts, both voiced and silent, scream out loud Katniss' autonomy. It took that connection with someone else—someone dependent on Katniss—to pull her toward this rebellious, autonomous voice. The one that says she is more than a pawn. That she loves deeply,

³⁷ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 202.

³⁸ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 237.

is fiercely loyal, and nothing the Capitol can do to her will change that. Once again, it is her love for others that inspires her to act. Tan asserts that not only do ‘the flowers allow Katniss to make a statement against the barbarity of killing young children, [but] also defy the divisions the Capitol wants to perpetuate among the districts.’³⁹ This defiance of the divisions sets the stage for her role uniting the districts which, in turn, allows for the success of the rebellion. Green-Barteet agrees that this act is significant because it is Katniss’ ‘first conscious act of rebellion’ and so will lead to more significant ones to come.⁴⁰

When analysing the power that rebellion against the norms can have for adolescent girls, Fritz comments that:

Katniss consistently demonstrates her empowerment through rebellious behavior that reflects her abilities to think for herself and to take action when it is necessary [...] she trusts her own judgement.⁴¹

Katniss continues to act on instinct and rebel against the Capitol when the Gamemakers try to manipulate Peeta and Katniss into killing each other. She uses her wit to outsmart them and threatens a *Romeo and Juliet* move: she and Peeta will commit suicide together by ingesting poison berries. While she thinks that this act is about her survival—it is really her heroic true self emerging. First, she decided that her autonomy was more important than her survival with the death of Rue. Now, she takes the final step and fights for both her life and her voice with a move that

³⁹ K.S. Hansen, ‘The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen: The Hunger Games, Myth, and Femininity’, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 40.2 (2015), 161-78 (p. 169) <<https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/article/581694>> [accessed 5 April].

⁴⁰ Green-Barteet, p. 39.

⁴¹ Fritz, p. 22.

outsmarts the puppeteers of the Games. It pays off. She and Peeta survive, but they are not out of danger.

At this point Katniss is unaware of the power she has taken back. She has found the technicality in the Capitol's playbook. She is still playing the game but she is using their rules against them—'they must have a victor.'⁴² She realizes that the Gamemakers will kill one of them with some horrible terrorizing creation. As she did when she volunteered for Prim, she takes the power of that decision. It is not a bluff; she is willing to follow this through all the way to the end of the act but she has hope she will not have to. Later she realizes what she has done:

Funny, in the arena, when I poured those berries, I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it.⁴³

She has shown the Capitol that those in charge do not hold all of the power. They have rigged the game with the most unfair odds, but she is able to win by finding the flaw in their system and exploiting it. If Katniss had refused to kill any other tribute or made some big speech to one of the cameras, the Gamemakers would have just conveniently killed her on the spot. But this act of saving herself and Peeta, within the confines of the enemy's own rules, puts the power of the choice within her hands but, more importantly, that power leads to her and Peeta's survival. Miranda Green-Barteet suggests that not only is this act 'significant' in regards to rebellion against injustice but it is just as important for Katniss' own 'self-discovery'.⁴⁴ It is Katniss

⁴² Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 344.

⁴³ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 358.

⁴⁴ Green-Barteet, p. 40.

deciding who she is and what she is willing to stand for, even to the death; it is Katniss finding her voice.

Katniss continues to wield her bow and arrow as her voice. Up until this point most of Katniss' actions, while heroic, have been based on survival. The exception being when she lovingly adorns Rue's dead body, which is still based on her instincts to protect. At the end of the second book, however, Katniss' action is the first of outright rebellion with no regard for her own, or anyone else's, safety. She shoots an arrow wrapped with wire connected to the lightning tree into the force field of the arena. She is hiding from a fellow tribute who is trying to kill her when she realizes that her enemy is not in the arena but the creators of it.

I rise, turning to the force field, fully revealing myself but no longer caring.

Only caring about where I should direct my tip. [...] My bow tilts up at the wavering square, the flaw [...] the chink in the armor. I let the arrow fly, see it hit its mark and vanish, pulling the thread of gold behind it.⁴⁵

She has found the loophole that she can thread her arrow through and tear down the very structure containing the games. For the first time, she fights not for her survival, or someone she loves, but against injustice. In fact, she does not even consider whether this will kill her when the lightning strikes. Her only regret is that she may have put Peeta at risk.

After the lightning strikes and the arena is falling apart, she lies unable to move. Waiting for death, she thinks of Peeta: 'I stole his last chance at life, condemned him, by destroying the force field. Maybe if we had all played by the

⁴⁵ Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* Kindle Edition (London: Scholastic, 2009) p. 378.

rules, they might have let him live.⁴⁶ Brown and Gilligan found in their study most girls who chose to use their voice and speak had to sacrifice relationships.⁴⁷ Katniss has to risk sacrificing the lives of those she loves in order to fight against the Capitol. She does not take the decision lightly but, in that moment, decides that fighting back is more important than any one individual. Ideally, the girls who look up to Katniss will never have to make this choice—to lay their lives on the line for what is right. But while we do not want them to have to *choose* to die for any cause, we would want them to use their voice for the things *worth* dying for.

In her loudest, most autonomous act, Katniss uses the arrow again, in her assassination of President Coin at the end of the third novel.⁴⁸ She knows that President Coin is responsible for the parachute bombs that killed Prim and the Capitol children. Katniss sees this as confirmation of her suspicions that Coin is no different from President Snow—that there is a fundamental irredeemable flaw in both of them: ‘[S]omething is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children’s lives to settle its differences.’⁴⁹ Katniss decides that she cannot allow one dictator to take the place of the previous one. This is significant because Katniss is not taking sides. She is not making the patriotic, loyal decision to support the leader of the rebellion—

⁴⁶ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 380.

⁴⁷ Brown and Gilligan, p. 14.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to consider Katniss’ relationship to President Coin. In a discussion regarding the relationship between young girls and the women in her life, it is important to consider whether President Coin represents the familiar conflict between older and younger women reflected in many fairy tales and perpetuated in films. The heroine is often offset by an older malevolent female figure. It is as if the price of seeing a young girl achieve, comes at the cost of seeing the older female extinguished. The perpetuation of this relationship is dangerous and destructive not only to young girls but women as well. But for my purposes it is interesting to consider what Collins has done with this relationship. Coin has no fear of being replaced by Katniss but what she does fear is Katniss’ voice. Boyle tells Katniss, Coin is trying to kill her because Katniss may not support Coin as the new leader of the future they are fighting for. Coin knows that whoever Katniss does support will be the choice of the people. Katniss’ voice has become so powerful Coin knows it will not only change the war, which she is using Katniss for, but she must silence Katniss’ voice if it initiates a future where Coin loses her own voice.

⁴⁹ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* Kindle Edition (London: Scholastic, 2010) p. 375.

the person responsible for the country's liberation from President Snow's reign. As Fritz states, 'Katniss demonstrates that she is capable of thinking and acting as an independent political entity'.⁵⁰ She decides that there is not a good or evil side to this war, there is only right and wrong.

With this last shot of her arrow she risks her life in order to break the cyclical destructiveness of human nature. 'You can spin it anyway you like. Snow thought the Hunger Games were an efficient means of control. Coin thought the parachutes would expedite the war.'⁵¹ She refuses to accept the justification of the killing of innocents in order to save more lives.

This is the major point where the series becomes problematic. For what Katniss fails to see, is that she is justifying execution without a trial. She takes a life to avenge the death of her sister and to prevent more deaths. Katniss acts out of grief, not heroism. She is autonomous and has not chosen a side, but does not carry her principles of nonviolence to their conclusion. If humans are 'monsters' for justifying killing other humans for the sake of the greater good, this should apply to her as well.⁵² However, this is only problematic for her role as heroine for young readers, but not problematic for writing a great story.

Collins has not written a perfect character. Perfect characters remain flat and one-dimensional on the white page. It is their imperfections that make them four dimensional and living in the reader's imaginations. Collins has created a real character and for Katniss this is an authentic trajectory. When Katniss has lost everything, even Prim, she sees no other option but the assassination of Coin. First

⁵⁰ Fritz, p. 24.

⁵¹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 375.

⁵² Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 375.

and foremost, Katniss' expression of voice is through action. In the logic of her argument, and for the sake of a perfect example for young readers, Katniss should have made a speech accusing President Coin of killing the children and called for a trial. Although, as Katniss suspected, President Coin is ushering in a new totalitarian regime and Katniss may have been killed under the new system. Either way, the act is authentic to her character. Katniss' voice is inextricably linked to the trajectory and accuracy of her arrow.

'I could swear there is someone, somewhere watching me':⁵³

Navigating Toxic Narratives

While searching for her authentic voice, one that will affect change, Katniss must also navigate the overall narrative that she finds herself in. Not only are many of the other characters in her story deadly, but she must navigate her connection to her audience. This means she must successfully navigate the media.

Katniss once again proves an effective role model for young girls. As I have discussed, girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen are finding their authentic voice and agency, but they are navigating this discovery amidst a cacophony of other voices. These other voices offer their own scripts or narratives and young girls must, as Katniss does, fight for their own power and cause.

Girls' Studies theorist Elline Lipkin breaks down the scripts and narratives that surround teen girls as they develop:

⁵³ Pitchford, 'Holding Out for a Hero'.

As girls move into their teenage years, [...] they encounter a more specific script—one in which their achievements are not necessarily celebrated nor their ambition rewarded. Rather, in adopting traits of traditional femininity, girls realize they must mute certain behaviors, and their understanding that they must take on these new traits often leaves girls feeling confused as they realize they might have to leave parts of their previous identity behind as they adapt to new roles.⁵⁴

Girls receive these scripts from all around them in the voices of their parents, teachers, friends and, most depressingly, the media. All of these scripts form a narrative—one with villains and heroes and prescriptions for happy endings or tragedy. Girls, like Katniss, receive lines. They can choose to recite them and perform the type casted role ‘that denies girls agency, boxes them into uncomfortable squares of traditional femininity’.⁵⁵ Or they can speak out and run ‘the risk of not fitting in, of not belonging’.⁵⁶ With the loud volume of the narrative the media presents, it is important to have other narratives on offer, from peers or caring parents or other adults. Elizabeth Iglesias and Sherry Cormier contend that ‘[t]oo often [...] adults collude with teenage girls in the loss of voice. [...] Many adolescent girls feel betrayed by the silence of the adults around them’.⁵⁷ Iglesias and Cormier argue that the cultivation of ‘mentor and advocate’ relationships is crucial if girls are ‘to develop

⁵⁴ Elline Lipkin, *Girls' Studies: Seal Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2009), p.23.

⁵⁵ Lipkin, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Iglesias and Cormier, p. 260.

⁵⁷ Iglesias and Cormier, p. 267.

long-term resistance strategies for liberation that foster[s] self-confidence and self-efficacy as they move into adulthood'.⁵⁸

Katniss experiences her own confrontation with a narrative role that is quite literally life or death. In an in-depth essay about the use of Panopticons in Collins' novels, Kelly Wezner argues that the Hunger Games, along with the constant surveillance of the totalitarian regime, is a concrete example of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. The surveillance is the discipline and the Hunger Games is the 'fictional—the omnipresent idea of punishment' which allows President Snow to control his people. In particular, 'As the Capitol's primary tool of control, nearly every aspect of the Hunger Games is televised. [...] The Capitol carefully edits broadcasts to present its story of the Games.'⁵⁹ For these broadcasts, Katniss is commodified for the entertainment of the citizens of Panem.

Just as the media offers a narrative for teen girls today, Katniss must play the role the entertainment monster has written for her. However, just like her young readers, Katniss is not alone. She has a mentor in Haymitch who has successfully (albeit drunkenly) navigated the Hunger Games and also its aftermath. She has Cinna who believes in her and sees the potential in her before she is aware of it herself. In addition to this, she has Peeta, a peer who is trying to survive just like her. Her trust in each of these people not only saves her life multiple times but helps her place her feet in strategic positions to become the voice of the rebellion.

⁵⁸ Iglesias and Cormier, p. 269.

⁵⁹ Kelley Wezner, "Perhaps I Am Watching You Now": *Panem's Panopticons*, in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins*, ed. by Mary F Pharr and Leisa A. Clark (London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2012) pp.148-57 (p. 148).

When Katniss arrives at the Capitol she is like an actor in a recurring role. The performance has been played out every year before. Only two tributes from her district have ever survived the Hunger Games, and the only one left alive is Haymitch. The audience and the media have already written her story: she will be fodder for the serious tributes—the Careers. Her death will provide the tension for the more exciting characters. Haymitch at first appears to be an albatross to any hope of success Katniss will have. He is drunk most of the time—living with the remnants of his own traumatic Hunger Games win. But when he sees that there is a chance he will not have to watch both tributes from his district die, he takes their preparation seriously.

Haymitch offers Katniss a way through. He does not let her focus on how unfair it all is—which is counterproductive and could cost her life. Like the mentors for adolescent girls, discussed by Iglesias and Cormier, Haymitch is willing to engage with Katniss, helping her ‘to move beyond resignation’ and to ‘be real’.⁶⁰ Haymitch offers Katniss the precise steps through a minefield set to blow with any false step. There is strategy to the Games and strategy later in the rebellion and, through each stage, Haymitch’s council is about keeping Katniss breathing. His advice more than once boils down to this: ‘Stay alive.’⁶¹ More specifically, he coaches her about when to hide her skill and when to show it. Haymitch also works as an advocate for her with sponsors—sending her lifesaving supplies when she needs them. And, most importantly, he tells her to do everything her stylist says. This turns out to be

⁶⁰ Iglesias and Cormier, p. 269.

⁶¹ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 56

significant not only for her survival but the ensuing rebellion. I will discuss this in-depth shortly.

Katniss resents Haymitch, yet she trusts him because he has walked this road. He does not paint a pretty, optimistic picture for her—which she would despise and reject. Katniss needs truth in order to succeed. Haymitch offers her the truth of the toll the Hunger Games takes as well as a successful navigation through each contest.

This relationship is significant for young readers; as Brown and Gilligan have shown, young girls need the guidance from those who have walked before them, typically a mother but not exclusively, yet they feel the need to break away from these relationships in order to succeed in a world in which achievement is embodied by people who are not like them—a society where men succeed more than women. Yet Brown and Gilligan argue that these mentor relationships are crucial if there is to be any gain in power.⁶² If mentors can connect with young girls, the relationships can build the foundation for change in a world conspiring against them. Despite her resentment, Katniss chooses to trust Haymitch and this trust is key to her survival.

If Haymitch is the voice of what is, then Cinna is the voice of what can be. Cinna is a part of the norm, yet he picks the moments for Katniss to push at the boundaries, causing the paradigm to shift, imperceptibly to anyone watching, but enough to first save her life and then for her to become who she is meant to be.

Cinna, heroic in his own right, emerges to assist Katniss through this minefield of the commodification of her body. The prescribed narrative of the media

⁶² Brown, 'Meeting at the Crossroads', p. 31-32.

is that she is an object. Tan states, '[f]rom the moment Katniss is selected as tribute she becomes public property.' Tan goes on to explain that Katniss is now a 'consumer item' which makes her 'posthuman'.⁶³ Her life can literally be purchased if the audience finds her appealing. They can sponsor her in the arena, sending her life saving supplies. Her very body is a product for their entertainment and objectification. In addition to this, she is confronted by the odd 'grotesque' alterations the Capitol citizens have subjected themselves to. They have bought in to the narrative that their natural human features are wrong. This also serves to mark the tributes as "other" and their deaths palatable and entertaining when they should be repulsive. Cinna helps Katniss challenge this narrative.

Cinna wins Katniss' trust almost immediately. First, because he has accepted his body as it is:

I'm taken aback by how normal he looks. Most stylists [...] are so dyed, stencilled, and surgically altered they're grotesque. But Cinna's close cropped hair appears to be in its natural shade of brown [...] The only concession to self-alteration seems to be metallic gold eyeliner that has been applied with a light hand. It brings out the flecks of gold in his green eyes.⁶⁴

Katniss sees this as the radical choice it is. She sees in Cinna someone who is within the system but has chosen not to let it consume him. She recognizes the rebel in him. Just as she bent the rules to hunt outside the perimeter fence, rejecting the narrative that she is not worth saving, Cinna has not accepted the narrative that there is

⁶³ Tan, p. 60.

⁶⁴ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 63.

something wrong with his body. In fact, the way he plays along with the system is in itself a protest. Rather than an alteration, he has chosen to accentuate something about his body that he is proud of—the gold in his eyes with gold eyeliner. Katniss can feel the connection from her inner honest voice to his honest way of being.

Next, he accepts her the way she is. She expects he will see her as a product for his own glorification: ‘Someone who viewed me as a piece of meat to be prepared for a platter.’⁶⁵ Instead, Cinna wants her to look natural.⁶⁶ Since she has arrived in the Capitol, she has been receiving the message that her body is not right, that her prep team must address some ‘obvious problems’.⁶⁷ Cinna rejects this narrative. This not only gains Katniss’ trust but is a powerful message to young readers whose bodies may be the site of severe anxieties.

In the same way Katniss works within the system to affect change, Cinna guides Katniss on her journey through the perils of entertainment. Kathryn Hansen writes that ‘Cinna uses clothing as a covert form of opposition to the Capitol’.⁶⁸ First, he plays the Capitol’s Game by making her costume for the opening ceremony sensational. ‘Clothing and style exert great power in the Capitol and [...] Cinna is well aware of this power.’⁶⁹ In order to make sure she is noticed, it must play to the tastes and flare of the Capitol palate. Then, once he has the audience’s attention, Cinna changes the narrative—not so much that anyone would notice, which could put Katniss at risk, but just enough so that the story she tells begins to change the overall story the totalitarian regime is telling. He has Peeta and Katniss hold hands. This has

⁶⁵ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 64.

⁶⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 64.

⁶⁷ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 61.

⁶⁸ Hansen, p. 167.

⁶⁹ Hansen, p. 167.

never been done before. Tributes accept the narrative that they must fight each other to the death even if they are from the same district. They must be complicit in the narrative of rivalry. They are pawns in a deadly chess game that the Capitol citizens comfortably distance themselves from. So that she is noticed—she needs sponsors—Katniss must be memorable. But holding hands allows her (and Peeta) to work their way into the people’s hearts. The Capitol citizens, her potential sponsors, all have friends. Empathy begins with finding common ground—with seeing the humanity in the “other”. This, indeed, helps secure sponsors but also makes it harder for the audience to keep their distance from the violence. This is not only important in the first Games but becomes even more vital when Katniss and Peeta are forced to participate in the Games for a second time. The public are so attached to the pair that they call the games ‘cruel’.⁷⁰ Cinna’s helps Katniss begin tell a new story, one that will eventually put an end to the Games for good.

In addition to this, Cinna is the voice that believes in Katniss before she finds anything in herself necessary for the rebellion. He is the first to call her the ‘girl on fire’ which becomes the theme of the rebellion.⁷¹ He is also the first to present her as the Mockingjay.⁷² In book two, when President Snow demands that Katniss wear one of the wedding dresses that were in the running for the Capitol people to choose, Cinna sets it on fire, revealing a Mockingjay complete with sleeves that look like wings. He pays for this act of rebellion with his life, but this overt act of reclamation of power propels Katniss forward to her most rebellious act—the arrow in the arena

⁷⁰ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 256

⁷¹ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 147.

⁷² When Katniss first enters the Game, her friend, Madge, gives her a gold pin in the shape of mockingjay bird. She is allowed to wear it in the arena as a ‘token’ from her district. This then becomes the symbol by which rebels identify themselves with the cause. In the end she embodies this and becomes the Mockingjay symbol. The rebellion refers to her as such for most of the third book.

dome. When navigating the perilous road of finding one's voice, the value of the voice of one who believes in you cannot be overestimated.

As her peer, Peeta also helps Katniss shift the paradigm of the totalitarian narrative. Collins captures the journey of young girls who feel a simultaneous pull to belong as well as a suspicion of their peers. Katniss likes Peeta and feels indebted to him for the bread; however, she sees any relationship with him as counterproductive to her goal to survive. The narrative the media presents is that the tributes are sub-human animals who are prepared, and even desire, to fight to the death. But Peeta, like Cinna, helps to change the narrative.

Hansen argues that the 'fabricated romance with Peeta Mellark helps give shape to the narrative that will save their lives and inspire a revolution.'⁷³ When Peeta declares his love for Katniss on the public stage, Haymitch says, 'He made you look desirable.'⁷⁴ Katniss is convinced he has made her look weak. The team work to convince her of the declaration's value, reassuring her that it makes her 'unforgettable'.⁷⁵ As discussed in 'The Selection' chapter, this is problematic; if her worth increases because she is loved by a boy, where is her inherent value and voice? However, both Katniss and Peeta use this narrative to survive and to gain power. In addition to this, both Katniss and Peeta offer their lives in equal displays of autonomy. It is another example of taking back the power of voice from the narrative that they are nothing more than animals. The declaration and subsequent way they portray themselves as 'star-crossed lovers' increases the amount of empathy the

⁷³ Hansen, p. 168.

⁷⁴ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 135.

⁷⁵ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 137.

Capitol audience has for them.⁷⁶ As Tan states, ‘Love, and with it, the willingness to sacrifice your life for another’s, elides the power of the Games altogether.’⁷⁷

It is disappointing that Collins did not make any of these key players women, as the reliance on male mentors and peers runs the risk of replicating deeply-rooted tropes of female dependence. Although Katniss needs and relies on these three men, she retains her agency. She could have let her resentment for Haymitch and her pride keep her from trusting him. She could have refused to be lit on fire for the opening ceremonies by Cinna, or rejected his advice on how to communicate with the audience, or refused to hold Peeta’s hand. And she could have played her own Game in the arena, choosing to fight on her own instead of working together with Peeta. Each of these decisions may have cost her life and certainly, while rebellious and autonomous, would have kept her from rising to her role as the Mockingjay. In accepting their help, she saves her life in order to affect great change. As opposed to the heroine in *‘The Selection’* series, who is a supporting actor to the men in the story even though she is the main character, Katniss is the star player but still part of a team.

Once again Katniss provides an exceptional role model for young readers. With the help of those around her, she works within the system. She takes small steps to shift the boundary of power and gain a voice. Sometimes changing the system means pushing at the boundaries from within. Along with the people supporting her, she took small steps to gain empathy, making the narrative of the Hunger Games seem less normal than before. Once you care for the person in the arena it becomes

⁷⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 135.

⁷⁷ Tan, p. 63.

far more personal. This slow movement of the norm allows for the eventual overthrowing of the totalitarian regime. She cannot change the Games but she can change the way the games are viewed. She takes advantage of each small gain of power and voice.

**‘She’s gotta be sure / and she’s gotta be larger than life’:⁷⁸
Abandoning the Script to Find an Authentic Voice**

Katniss’ act of shooting her arrow into the arena dome, discussed above, is the first time she acts purely as a rebel. She acts against injustice despite the consequences; while it does not cost her life, it catapults her onto the rebellion’s stage. She is cast as the face of the rebellion—a role she has not asked for and one she is not sure she can perform.

Through her actions, and the help of those she trusts, Katniss progressively finds her voice. But now that she has it, others want to use it for their own messages. The leaders of the rebellion have seen she has power and seek to harness this for their own ends. In *Mockingjay*, she is costumed, painted, and pointed toward a camera with a scripted line: ‘*People of Panem, we fight, we dare, we end our hunger for justice!*’⁷⁹ The line itself is a poor excuse for an inspiring speech. It is written by those who understand the concept of war but have not experienced it. The production team from the Capitol suffers little on their journey to rebellion. This leaves a vacuum in their search for the right words in the arsenal of propaganda—they even call the series of clips they want Katniss to perform ‘propos—which is short for “propaganda

⁷⁸ Pitchford, ‘Holding Out for a Hero’.

⁷⁹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 69.

spots”⁸⁰ Propaganda is designed to ‘promote a political cause or point of view’, in other words, carefully constructed.⁸¹ This team is accustomed to a different audience.

For their previous audience in the Capitol, the constructed content was for viewers who were living a life of abstraction, which developed out of a need to numb oneself to the realities of privilege delivered on the backs of the suffering of others. Plutarch describes it as ‘*Panem et Circenses* [...] in return for full bellies and entertainment... [the] people had given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power.’⁸² In order to avoid introspection, these distractions must lack depth. Katniss realizes that the ‘silly’ things that her prep team worries about are a product of their carefully constructed environment of opulence and distractions.⁸³ She muses:

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.⁸⁴

The writers of the script have grown accustomed to distracting the masses with trivial concerns and packaging something as grotesque as kids killing kids for entertainment. The only way to achieve this is to dress the truth up in abstractions—palatable packaging that does not require the audience to feel the reality and humanity of its horror but instead treat it as sport. Collins, herself, calls attention to the

⁸⁰ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 41.

⁸¹ ‘Propaganda’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) [Accessed 10 August 2017]

⁸² Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 221.

⁸³ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 37.

⁸⁴ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 38.

desensitization to violence our current society indulges in.⁸⁵ ‘I am fearful that today people see so many reality shows and dramas that when real news is on, its impact is completely lost.’⁸⁶ She exaggerates this as a warning—a dystopian prophesy of the way we are entertaining ourselves into complacency and indifference to the issues we should be fighting against. Tan argues that because the Hunger Games are viewed on screen, viewers lose touch with reality. She says, ‘television seeks only to entertain—to leave an impression rather than impress an image—these images lose meaning’.⁸⁷ If violence or human rights issues are abstract and have no human attachment they become background noise in the louder, petty worries the media construct for the masses.

The scripted line the media-savvy production team gives Katniss, then, is abstract and hollow—there is no substance that will allow Katniss’ audience to feel the imperative to follow her into battle for a righteous cause. The words are intended to encourage the masses but instead they are peppy and fizzy, written by those who are used to catching attention for a fleeting moment and then releasing it for the next distraction. Katniss knows this when she is given the line to memorize. ‘It seems like a mouthful to me, though. [...] I can’t imagine actually saying it in real life—unless I was using a Capitol accent to make fun of it.’⁸⁸ Katniss realizes the line has no truth—no understanding of what it is like to *fight* or *hunger for justice*. But she delivers the line anyway, wanting to do her part and help the cause. She yells ‘with all

⁸⁵ Suzanne Collins, ‘Suzanne Collins Part 3 – Desensitization’, Online Interview <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtLR-THbnHk>> [Accessed 10 August 2017].

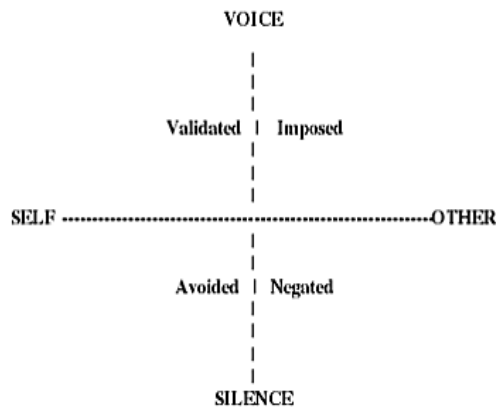
⁸⁶ James Blasingame, ‘An Interview With Suzanne Collins’, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52.8 (2009), 726-7, (p. 727) <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/216921855?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 29 July 2017].

⁸⁷ Tan, p. 66.

⁸⁸ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 70.

the anger [she] can muster'.⁸⁹ There is silence in the room. No one is buying what she is selling, even the writers of the line. In the end, Haymitch sums up the project: 'And that, my friends, is how a revolution dies.'⁹⁰

Power to influence can only come through loyalty to the truth in one's self. Looking at Fivush's model of voice and silence, here, Katniss still does not have the power because her voice is actually expressing someone else's voice. This puts her firmly in the right lower quadrant of the model; her voice is negated because, even though she is speaking, it is not her true voice which, according to the model, requires the true autonomous self.



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Katniss is not offended or surprised at her failure, believing that she is to blame. She thinks that the only way she has survived the cameras before, is because of Peeta, who has a gift with words and public speaking. But this is not the case.

⁸⁹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 70.

⁹⁰ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 70.

⁹¹ Weeks and Pasupathi, p. 71.

Katniss has an effective voice but it is heard through action—authentic to who she is. The production team regroups and sits around a table listing the events discussed above, such as volunteering for Prim, or the berries with Peeta. They realize it is Katniss' authentic voice—her actions—that inspire.

Collins demonstrates the connection between authenticity and effective communication. The production team must let Katniss out into the real world—where the fighting is. It is here, in the grit, reality, and with her people that Katniss at last begins to find the exact pitch and tenor of her voice. Katniss finds that her voice is not limited to her actions. She can speak, as long as she writes the lines. True to who she is, she finds it talking to the wounded—those the Capitol has harmed in the war. At first she finds her voice by just assuring them that she is real and physically unharmed. Then she stands on a table to wave good-bye and she realizes people are listening:

A new sensation begins to germinate inside me. [...] Power. I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. Snow knew it, as soon as I held out those berries. Plutarch knew when he rescued me from the arena. And Coin knows now. So much so that she must publicly remind her people that I am not in control.⁹²

Once Katniss is true to who she is, she feels the influence she can have on those around her. She feels the power that an authentic voice, being heard, can produce. This is magnified when the Capitol bombs the hospital that she has just left. She

⁹² Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 88.

fights back with her new bow and arrow and then, significantly, when her actions fail and the Capitol levels the building on the wounded, she finds her own words.

‘I want to tell the rebels that I am alive. That I am right here in district eight, where the Capitol has just bombed a hospital full of unarmed men, women, and children. There will be no survivors. [...] I want to tell the people that if you think for one second the Capitol will treat us fairly if there is a ceasefire, you’re deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do. [...] This is what they do! And we must fight back! [...] President Snow is sending us a message? Well I have one for him. You can torture us and bomb us and burn our districts to the ground [...] Fire is catching! [...] And if we burn, you burn with us!’⁹³

Comparing these lines to the ones that the rebellion fed to her, there is a clear difference. The first deals in abstract concepts. Words like ‘dare’ and ‘justice’ leave nothing for the tired fingers or minds of the rebel fighters to grasp. Not only does Katniss herself struggle to grasp them but, when she speaks them, they have no substance. On the other hand, when Katniss speaks honestly, allowing her rage to articulate for her—the words are tangible. ‘Fire is catching’ is a sensory picture. You can see the flames, feel the heat, you can hear the crackle of sparks. Her fellow rebels have something tangible to grab onto. Her authentic voice speaks truth. And when the footage airs to the rebels, there is silence again but this time the silence is that hushed suspension of time when your body is held hostage by the visceral moment before

⁹³ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 98.

your mind can respond. And then the audience cheers and demands to see it again.⁹⁴ One could argue that it is the truth and raw honesty that holds authenticity and therefore it demands to be heard. Her voice holds the power because it holds the truth. Anne Lamott says, truth in itself is revolutionary, ‘truth is always subversive.’⁹⁵

Truth itself is an abstract concept; it requires experience. It is true the rebels must ‘fight’ and ‘dare’ and ‘hunger for justice’. But the person speaking about justice must feel it. The person must feel the truth of the rage against the death of innocents—they must carry the weight of the stench of burning bodies and balance on injured legs from the bomb blast. Only then can it be heard. Only then does it have any sort of power. For a rebel to have true power then, she must forge her voice out of the fire of truth. Then she can change her world.

‘Through the wind, and the chill, and the rain / And the storm, and the flood’:⁹⁶ Finding Voice in Trauma

When discussing voice and silence it is necessary to consider not only chosen silence but imposed silence. It can be argued that one can only choose silence when one has the total autonomous use of voice. An imposed silence can come from the outside oppressor or from within one’s own body after one has experienced trauma. As we have seen, Collins examines silence in all of these ways, but she spends a significant amount of time delineating the traumatic implications of war on Katniss and those

⁹⁴ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 104.

⁹⁵ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 226.

⁹⁶Pitchford, ‘Holding Out for a Hero.’

that she loves. Collins has said, of ‘The Hunger Games’, she wanted to interrogate an ambivalence to war. These books

first and foremost [are about] the issue of war. [...] Because the young soldiers dying in the war in Iraq, it’s not going to end at the commercial break. It’s not something fabricated, it’s not a game. It’s your life.⁹⁷

In order to offer a critique of war, Collins could not have left Katniss unscathed by the reality of the world she fought against. She is a hero, but Collins shows that even heroes are broken by war and thus the validity of war should be interrogated; otherwise, the effects of war are watered down, palatable and cleanly forgotten.

Collins expertly handles trauma in relation to agency and silence. In the same way that I have been discussing an authorial voice as autonomy or agency, I would like to consider silence as the loss of agency, specifically, how trauma relates to the body’s self-imposed silence and the relationship to voice and recovery of agency after trauma. In *Unspeakable* Avigail Gordon and Kate Szymanski directly relate trauma to a loss of voice or silence: ‘An incomprehensible event cannot be constituted in language.’ Yet they say that regaining one’s voice or ‘narrative’ is the key ‘to facilitate the transition from victim to survivor’.⁹⁸ I argue that even though Katniss is broken, she can still be a role model for her young readers. Through Collins’ honest look at the effect of war and Katniss’ courageous act of finding her voice again,

⁹⁷Hannah Trierweiler Hudson, ‘Q&A; with Hunger Games Author Suzanne Collins’, <<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/qa-hunger-games-author-suzanne-collins/>> [Accessed 10 August 2017], n.p.

⁹⁸ Gordon, Avigail and Kate Szymanski, ‘Breaking the Silence: Reevaluating What Makes an Experience a Trauma’, in *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, ed. Magda Stroinska, Vikki Cecchetto and Kate Szymanski, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 249-262 <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1766425>> [accessed 20 July 2017].

Katniss is an exceptional example of what it means to fight for your voice when it is lost to trauma.

The first time readers encounter silence, in relation to trauma, is through Katniss' eyes. Her father dies and Katniss' mother becomes almost catatonic:

She didn't do anything but sit propped in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets in bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Once in a while, she'd stir, get up as if moved by some urgent purpose, only then to collapse back into stillness.⁹⁹

Katniss, while dealing with her own grief, resents her mother. She describes feeling that she 'had lost not only a father but a mother as well'.¹⁰⁰ When her mother comes to say goodbye to her, when she is leaving for the Hunger Games, Katniss yells at her that, no matter what happens to Katniss, she must not 'clock out' again. 'My voice has risen to a shout. In it is all the anger, all the fear I felt at her abandonment.'¹⁰¹ This abandonment severs a connection between Katniss and her mother. 'I am trying to get past rejecting offers of help from her. For a while I was so angry, I wouldn't allow her to do anything for me.'¹⁰²

Katniss' resentment is not hard to understand. However, there is another deeper implication when considering voice. When readers first meet Katniss, she claims to just want to survive and, in order to do so, she plays by the rules; she does what is required of her; and keeps her mouth shut. But deep within Katniss is the voice of the rebel—a rebel who has been silenced. Her mother's silence is a mirror of her own feelings of weakness in the face of the Capitol's power and control in the

⁹⁹ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁰ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 27.

¹⁰¹ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 35.

¹⁰² Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 35.

districts. At the core of who she is, she wants to fight for what is right but she cannot without risking her or her sister's life. Her mother's voicelessness is a picture of the powerlessness Katniss feels. So, while she thinks she resents her mother (and this is partly true) the deep anger is a reaction against her own imposed silence and inability to fight back against the Capitol.

Katniss, deep within herself, still has agency, as evidenced by her chosen silence to appease her mother when she is young. However, she feels the opposing message, seeping into her pores like the coal dust that 'settled on everything':¹⁰³ that she is worth nothing. Her mother's inability to act is not only terrifying because Katniss may die as a direct result of it, but also because it is the dystopian, or exaggerated, picture of the loss of agency that the world around her demands.

However, what is even more significant is that her mother's inaction is the catalyst for Katniss taking her first step toward embracing her identity as a rebel. When she is eleven, Prim is seven, and all three of them are starving—Katniss chooses to act. As I have already discussed, Katniss' voice is tied to her actions. At the very brink of her adolescence, and identity formation, she must choose to act and become the 'head of the family'.¹⁰⁴ She struggles and nearly fails. But then she remembers the things her father taught her about foraging and hunting and she works up the courage to go into the woods alone, without him to protect her, and she saves her family. She rejects the message that she can do nothing while those around her 'keel over from starvation everyday'.¹⁰⁵ She does not have to watch her young sister starve. She can act.

¹⁰³ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁴ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 204.

The illegal act of hunting outside of the perimeter fence lays the groundwork for Katniss taking the series of stands that will eventually change her world. This small rebellion, in order to save herself and her family, provides the courage she needs to accomplish the more daring acts I have already discussed. She rejects the message that her mother's silence confirms—that she is worth nothing more than a cheap replaceable part in a machine designed to serve the wants and needs of the Capitol. Once she has done this, the paradigm shifts just enough so that the next time she has to make the brave and risky choice she is ready. Hunting outside the perimeter fence is an act of reclaiming the self. It asserts that she and her sister are worth saving even if the totalitarian regime disagrees. It is the performative act that pushes the outer boundary of the norm that says she must accept the things that are and die.¹⁰⁶ This disregard of the message causes the norm to shift in Katniss, which allows her to push the dominant narrative of the people in the districts later and be the voice of their rebellion. It is this spark of autonomy that lights the fire of her rebellion later.

Collins' unflinching critique of war leads to the inevitable trauma that Katniss herself is faced with. What is important is the way Collins uses Katniss' actual voice to guide her back from the imposed silence of trauma.

In *Catching Fire* when Katniss shoots her arrow into the arena dome, she is prepared to die. Indeed, she suffers a head injury from fellow tribute Johanna; a deep cut in her arm; and the arrow is a conduit for the lightning strike which renders her unconscious. When she wakes and she is not dead, but learns that Peeta has been

¹⁰⁶ 'Performative act' is being used here as an act which performs an identity that either enforces or juxtaposes established societal norms; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

taken hostage in the Capitol, she flies into a rage that only drugs can combat. After the rage, she spirals into the numbness that can come after a trauma. Katniss says:

I give up. Stop speaking, responding, refuse food and water. They can pump whatever they want to into my arm, but it takes more than that to keep a person going once she's lost the will to live.¹⁰⁷

As we have seen before, Katniss' voice and her ability to resist is inextricably linked to her relationships with others. She becomes despondent when she realizes her efforts to save Peeta were in vain. She is lost until Gale comes to visit. He is burned and his presence triggers her release from the dark closed space she has created.

It is not so much a question of forgetting Peeta as remembering the others. All it takes is one look at Gale and they come surging back to the present, demanding to be acknowledged. 'Prim?' I gasp.¹⁰⁸

Her first step from the silence her trauma has induced, comes on the breath of the names of the others she has not lost—Gale and Prim. But Collins does not let Katniss or her reader off so easily—and so she should not; trauma does not disappear with the gratefulness of what one still has. Its mark leaves a wound that must heal despite the rest of the body's health. Katniss realizes there are others she must live for but that does not take away the pain from what she has lost. And, in fact, things are about to get much worse.

Katniss learns that her entire district was bombed, and many are dead as a result of the action she took with her arrow. Katniss now exists in limbo. Her actual head injury combined with the medications she is on, and her psychological trauma,

¹⁰⁷ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 389.

¹⁰⁸ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 390.

leave her trying ‘to sort out what is true and false’.¹⁰⁹ Even the events of her day cannot be categorized. This is common experience for victims of trauma. Gordon and Szmanski write that ‘Tragic experiences challenge a person’s sense of narrative coherence and sense of identity’.¹¹⁰ In order to resist this, Katniss uses a technique:

I start with the simplest things I can remember and work toward the more complicated. The list begins to roll in my head... *My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is thought to be dead. Most likely he is dead. It is probably better if he is dead...*¹¹¹

It is not a cosy lullaby or bedtime story. It does not speak any comfort to her; rather, it grounds her to the truth, no matter how terrifying. When her ‘thoughts begin to tangle’, Katniss uses her voice to reconstruct the narrative that has been lost in the trauma.¹¹² Gordon and Szmanski highlight that ‘telling or writing the story of the traumatic experience is commonly prescribed as a healing mechanism’.¹¹³ And indeed through this repetitive process Katniss makes progress. As previously discussed, she chooses to be the voice of the rebellion. She marches them all the way to President Snow’s front steps.

And then the unthinkable happens. Prim, the one who started it all, is in danger, but this time Katniss cannot shout her name loud enough. She cannot get to

¹⁰⁹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Gordon, p. 264.

¹¹¹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 2.

¹¹² Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 35.

¹¹³ Gordon, p. 252.

her in time. Bombs disguised as supplies sent in by parachutes have exploded and Prim rushes to help the wounded.

First I get a glimpse of the blond braid down her back. [...] I notice the duck tail formed by her untucked shirt. I have the same reaction I did the day Effie Trinket called her name at the reaping. [...] Then I am pushing through the crowd, just as I did before. Trying to shout her name above the roar. I'm almost there, almost to the barricade, when I think she hears me. [...] And that's when the rest of the parachutes go off.¹¹⁴

Prim is dead and Katniss is now lost in the same silence that she despised so vehemently in her mother. She contemplates suicide. After everything she has done, all she has accomplished has been for nothing. The sacrifices she made to save her sister were for nothing—her sister is dead. Prim will never inhabit the world Katniss was trying to fight for and build for her. And yet, as only a true hero can, she finds her voice, this time in song:

I will become a yellow-skinned bag of bones, with enormous eyes. I'm a couple of days into the plan, making good progress, when something unexpected happens. I begin to sing. At the window, in the shower, in my sleep. Hour after hour of ballads, love songs, mountain airs. [...] My voice at first rough and breaking on the high notes, warms up into something splendid. A voice that would make the Mockingjays fall silent and then tumble over themselves to join in.¹¹⁵

This is voice in its very raw but distinctive form. A voice is as unique as a fingerprint, a picture of our individuality. For Katniss, it is tied to her father and a previous self

¹¹⁴ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 345.

¹¹⁵ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 374.

that was unafraid to speak—the girl who ‘knew the valley song’ and stood ‘on a stool’ and sang it for her class.¹¹⁶ She was unshakable, confident in the notes her vocal chords could form. When she starts singing again, she is connected to the girl she used to be—before the flames of her sacrifice scorched her lungs.

This use of her voice propels her through the act of the assassination of President Coin; but, even then, she assumes she will die and attempts suicide, only to be saved by Peeta. There are scores of critical discussions, both positive and negative, on the depictions of teen suicide and mental health in Young Adult literature and for my purpose here—to find a model heroine—it could be seen as problematic. However, Collins is not examining suicide but the effect of war on the individual, including its sometimes devastating effect on mental health. In so doing, she must take an unflinching look at the cost of fighting and for the authenticity of Katniss’ character; she must find her way through the effects of war as well as the war itself. If Collins had shied away from this in order to avoid the implications of a suicidal heroine, her honest look at the cost of war would have become false. Not only that, but the reality of heroic acts is, they do not always win everything in the end. Katniss succeeds in her quest but there is a cost. In addition to this, Katniss shows remarkable strength as she makes her way back through the black suffocating fog of grief and trauma that makes her consider suicide. Her bravery in this very personal fight is just as heroic and worth the same admiration as her other, world-changing acts. For these reasons, the portrayal of Katniss as the suicidal heroine is honest and therefore necessary and effective.

¹¹⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 301.

Another significant detail in Collins' look at post-traumatic stress is that it is Katniss' voice that helps her take back her agency. After months of solitude and depression, she decides to hunt. While out, she encounters Prim's cat, Buttercup and tries to make him understand Prim is dead. The cat and Katniss cry together: 'A new sound, part crying, part singing, comes out of my body, giving voice to my despair.'¹¹⁷ It is in this combination of Katniss' action in hunting (her first autonomous act of rebellion) and singing (the use of voice at its most unique, yet basic, form) that Katniss begins to find her way back from the oblivion of trauma.

Gordon and Szmanski argue that navigating one's way from victim to survivor 'is an active role'; the victim was not in control but, by using one's voice they can take back control.¹¹⁸ This time, Katniss finds her voice not for anyone else but herself. She decides she will survive. Even if she is alone. That she is worth living for. She is worth life. She is worth saving. She is the hero in her own personal struggle.

Young readers learn, then, that doing what you can for others is heroic but also fighting for your own voice and escaping from self-imposed or trauma-imposed silence is a worthy, difficult, and righteous cause.

¹¹⁷ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 384.

¹¹⁸ Stroinska, p. 252.

‘I may be disturbed, but won’t you concede / Even heroes have the right to dream’:¹ Conclusion

I first saw reruns of *Wonder Woman* on half a television screen—ducking behind the couch with only the bridge of my nose in line with the top edge of the cushion. My two older sisters watched with one eye to the window overlooking the short driveway outside our house. The headlights of my parents’ car would flash and one of them would shoot out of their seat and turn the television off (by hand, of course, because remote controls were in the same category as flying cars—at least for a family with our income). *Wonder Woman*, with her revealing clothing and independent attitude, in our family, represented an assault on ‘family values’. At the time, I remember the quiet rumble of the ‘decline of America’, this vague, abstract idea that was filled with fear. I was too young to understand what it was, but trusted my parents that it was serious. I was a good girl, so I would watch my one allotted television show—*Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. But my sisters always pushed against the boundaries imposed on them and *Wonder Woman* was on occasionally. Somehow, if I hid behind the couch, I was convinced that I could watch but be saved from contributing to the decline of America.

Fast forward to 2017; I am nearing the completion of this thesis and I am sitting with my best friend watching *Wonder Woman* on, not just the big screen but, the extreme screen. I am giddy, so much so that I may have regressed to that little girl hiding behind the couch when she heard the theme song to the television show come on. I am not disappointed. Not only is *Wonder Woman*, herself, kickass, but every woman with a supporting role has something to offer. Even the

¹ John Ondrasik, ‘Superman (It’s Not Easy)’, perf. by Five for Fighting, *America Town*, (Nashville, Tennessee: EMI, 2009).

secretary fights but with her ‘principles’ instead of her fists. I am so grateful to have a film that I will be happy for my daughter to watch. The theatre is packed and it continues to make money.² This is despite claims that female heroines will not bring in the money that studio executives demand.³ Yet, in spite of the success of this film, the strong heroine is drowning in a sea of other stories where the portrayal of normative behaviour of young girls is problematic for their development.

There is a thread of frustration that seems to weave through Girl’s Studies research. It is a fairly new field—not even thirty years old. Many are frustrated that, in trying to gain equality in education, sports and in society in general, we are actually making it more difficult on young girls. The fear is that, in ensuring girls are given all of the options, we might compound a teenager’s sense of failure when she does not meet this new standard of “girl”. While girls are still receiving messages in the media that they must have perfect, unattainable bodies in order to be happy, they are also still objectified and are at alarmingly high risk of rape or sexual assault.⁴ Meanwhile, we tell them that they should be getting the highest grades and participating in sports, and that they can take care of themselves. Marnina Gonick highlights the dual message we have been giving girls since the inception of Girls’ Studies:

In rearticulating femininity as comprising both powerful ambitions for autonomy and vulnerability so extreme as to threaten extinction, Girl

² ‘*Wonder Woman* has now brought in \$786 million globally, which narrowly edges out *Deadpool*’s whopping \$783.1 million (the record for biggest R-rated film ever).’; Chris Agar, ‘*Wonder Woman* Passes *Deadpool*’s Worldwide Box Office’, 2017 <<http://screenrant.com/wonder-woman-deadpool-box-office-worldwide/>> [Accessed 10 August 2017].

³ Eline Lipkin, *Girls’ Studies: Seal Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2009), p. 149.

⁴ ‘Females ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.’; ‘Children and Teens: Statistics’ <<https://rainn.org/>> [Accessed 19 August 2017].

Power and Reviving Ophelia bespeak the two central and interrelated contradictions of the times.⁵

The structure of this thesis highlights these two extremes. America is the heroine who, rather than deconstructing, perpetuates the harmful forces that Mary Pipher exposes in *Reviving Ophelia*, and Katniss embodies the ideals of the Girl Power movement with so much success she may seem exceptional. Without dismantling the absurd and impossible standards relating to female beauty, society has created a whole new set of standards for girls to fail at achieving. In the end, girls may be left with the same feeling of inferiority that I have dissected in my thesis.

This is why focusing on voice and individuality is vital. A girl must find what she is passionate about and pursue that. Voice is the very thing that will allow girls to begin to change the culture around them. That is why books like *The Hunger Games* are so important—Katniss finds her voice—and why books like *The Selection*, which silence girls, are so problematic. ‘The Selection’ series is a toxic example of the passive voiceless heroine. It is the very worst kind of poison. It looks, smells, and tastes like an elixir of happiness but, if it is ingested, only succeeds in deforming young girls’ identities and encouraging them to subsume their individuality in that of a romantic partner. ‘The Hunger Games’ is the antidote. Katniss is a role model for finding your voice in a world that demands silence. In this way she is not providing another strict code for young girls to live up to, but offers a road map to discovering your own voice while working with others and maintaining relationships. She does not try to tackle everything at once; instead she fights for what she cares about the most.

⁵ Marnina Gonick, ‘Between “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia”’: Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject’, in *NWSA Journal*, 18.2 (2006), pp. 1-23 (p. 19) <<https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/article/199490>> [accessed 21 June 2017].

Voice was also the reason I chose to focus on dystopian texts. These worlds, while entertaining, call attention to the fact that voice and change are required. As I discussed in the introduction, the dystopian world allows for an examination of possible trajectories of current political and cultural issues. The exaggeration of the worlds' perils allows for a closer interrogation of what is the real cost of loss of voice and the benefit of its discovery. In 'The Selection' the voice is silenced and very little change occurs. In 'The Hunger Games', one small voice changes the nation. As Erikson argues, it is only by enabling all humans to navigate each crises and form their identities that we will 'transcend the dangerous imagery of victory and defeat, of subjugation and exploitation which is the heritage of a fragmented past'.⁶

My critique of Kiera Cass is connected to the research of many concerned individuals who walk the tightrope of identifying problematic tropes while simultaneously advocating for freedom of choice for women. It seems like an oxymoron; feminism and Girls' Studies both advocate for voice, so how can one criticise the voice of an author? Not only that but, as a fledgling author myself, I understand just how difficult it is to get characters to come alive on the page. A cardinal rule is, the more you try to direct the characters the more one-dimensional and unrealistic they become. If a character's only goal is to marry a boy, and you as an author refuse, then you are limiting that choice, and limiting your character. Anne Lamott warns, 'As soon as you start protecting your

⁶ Sunil Batra, 'The Psychosocial Development of Children: Implications for Education and Society — Erik Erikson in Context', *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 10.2 (2013), 249-78 (p. 276)
<<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/abs/10.1177/0973184913485014>>
[accessed 15 August 2017].

characters from the ramifications of their less-than-lofty behavior, your story will start to feel flat and lifeless.’⁷

It was difficult for me as a writer to critique an author whose books had made it to number one on the New York Times Best Seller list. Clearly Cass is writing what audiences want to hear. However, the problem is not with the author, the problem is with the culture.

Judith Butler has shown that we repeatedly enact problematic beliefs about gender and as a result we continue to perpetuate the heteronormative romance. Butler highlights that ‘‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.’⁸ Young Adult literature needs to be working within the norm to repeatedly push at the boundaries. It cannot go completely outside it or it will alienate readers who are still not only enjoying seeing and reading these performative acts, but reinforcing them in their everyday lives. In order for a reader to connect with a creative piece, to relate to the character, they must see common ground. If there is any hope for a paradigm shift, some degree of empathy must be achieved. Therefore, if Young Adult literature is going to challenge these heteronormative roles it must first acknowledge it is still something readers may desire.

This thesis is lacking a discussion of the development of the representation of races other than white and the difficulties surrounding those girls identifying with the LGBTQ community. Iglesias and Cormier are specifically interested in this and how it relates to the study done by Brown and Gilligan.⁹ Antero Garcia’s

⁷ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) p. 45.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 145.

⁹ Elizabeth Iglesias, and Sherry Cormier, ‘The Transformation of Girls to Women: Finding Voice and Developing Strategies for Liberation’, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 30.4 (2002), 259-7<<https://search-proquest->

work is specifically concerned with the implications of seeing these groups represented in Young Adult Literature.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the representation of these groups is still very low in this genre, so the books I have chosen to focus on here are still representative of the norm, which is what I was preoccupied with interrogating. Hopefully, as writers continue to push the boundaries toward equal and heroic representations of women, these other groups will be more fully and diversely represented as well.

With these issues in mind, I embarked on writing the creative component to this thesis. Since I am white and heterosexual I did not feel qualified (with my literary techniques still finding their feet) to speak in a voice that I do not fully understand. While empathy, I believe, can and should go a long way, I did not feel I could do justice to the marginalization and feelings of inferiority that women of other races and sexual orientation experience on a daily basis. Also, I wanted to explore the specific concerns, raised in my research, that are affecting girls in a general sense and felt I could not give those additional issues the weight they deserve. The last thing I want to do is perpetuate this marginalization of others by telling their story. Carolyn Cocca articulates this:

Dominant groups have been telling not only their own stories but the stories of those whom they have marginalized as well: whites telling the stories of people of color, men telling stories of women, heterosexuals telling stories of queers, nondisabled people telling stories of disabled

com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/235995604?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 9 September 2016].

¹⁰ Antero Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres*, ed. by P. L. Thomas (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2013).

people. Sometimes they are terrific stories. But often their lack of authenticity means they're not only inaccurate, but harmful.¹¹

Even though I have experienced marginalization because of my gender, I am still a part of a more privileged group. In order to achieve authenticity, I needed to stay within the confines of “writing what I know”. For example, in a more superficial sense, I chose to base the story in Denver, Colorado because I am originally from there, again, for authenticity so that I could see, feel, hear and taste what my characters did.

I love stories, and when I began to write the creative portion to my thesis it quickly became apparent I was writing a novel (and now it seems it will have a second book). With my supervisors, I have chosen to include a portion that is about a third of the way into the story. This is the section that most closely deals with the issues discussed in the exegesis.

The inspiration for my heroine, Megan, was drawn, again, from my daughter. In the beginning she was the image and voice in my head. But in later drafts Megan took on her own personality and even looks entirely different to my daughter—though some of her most endearing qualities still remain. I wanted to create a character who walked the line somewhere in between America and Katniss. She would be strong but ordinary. It was fine to have a favourite pair of sparkly jeans and a particular love of shoes. She has talent—she is a runner and is a good shot—but she is not extraordinary. I wanted her to have to face her

¹¹ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2016), p. 5 <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=4585044>> [accessed 1 May 2017].

challenges as a normal girl. Anything she is good at is the result of learning and practice.

While trying not to direct my character too much, I did want to achieve some goals in pushing at the boundaries of the normative roles that girls are presented with. I wanted to take a focused look at media and expose the way it can reinforce any number of problematic ideas—but specifically, in this story, the way that the subjugation and oppression of women is justified. I did this in the creation of the dystopic world Megan inhabits but also in the use of a reality television show. In this way, I wanted to address some of the problematic themes that ‘The Selection’ series perpetuates as well as pay homage to authors like Suzanne Collins and Margaret Atwood. In addition to the media, I wanted to confront head on the inevitability of girls fighting each other. Putting that norm firmly to rest, Megan finds not only friends but other strong talented girls to take on the dictatorship. And lastly I wanted to explore the idea that romance was possible while still forming identities but without loss of agency or voice. In using a love triangle (while diffuse because the first relationship is never fully established) I wanted to address that relationships are messy and that not all hearts are protected in the process.

At times, during the writing of this thesis, I doubted my own voice, often reverting to more articulate and learned theorists. I would doubt whether what I had to say would make a difference. University can be its own utopia; so many likeminded people passionate about the way art can make the world a better place. It can feel like society has made significant progress and issues of equality are starting to dissolve. Then one day I went to get a cup of coffee in the staff lounge and a professor asked what my thesis was about. Having perfected my elevator

pitch, I said it was about the importance of Young Adult dystopian heroines in the development of young girls' identities. His response was, 'teenage girls are mean.'

I said, 'they can be yes, it—'

'I think it's because of the hormones.' The interruption prickled doubt along my skin.

I squared my shoulders and said a prayer to those wise theorists, 'Well hormones are tricky at that age but research has shown that young girls often feel the need to separate from other girls because they still live in a patriarchal society. They associate other girls with—'

'But really it's just the hormones.' He gave me a benevolent smile and a wink and I tried to graciously remove myself from the conversation.

I sort of tumbled back to my desk. First, I felt inferior, doubting the relevance of my words, wondering if I had missed some key bit of research that pointed to hormones as the cause for all the problems confronting young girls. I was pretty paranoid, at this point, that I had overlooked something, even though I have stacks of books, three large binders straining at their rings with research and more in files on my computer. Then I was defiant. I was previously a nurse and, while I knew that hormones were essential when considering the efficacy and safety of medication, they had absolutely nothing to do with equality. Then I was angry that someone could, in 2017, reduce important, psychosocial issues related to gender, to hormones.

Eventually, back at my computer, assembling sentences, I was grateful for the encounter. He was a former high school teacher and now professor—

encountering many young girls at this very critical time in their lives. In making me doubt the relevance of my thesis he had confirmed the need for it. If we are going to have any hope of change, we cannot keep dismissing these issues as inevitable.

I may not be able to hold my own in a conversation in a crowded staffroom, with someone far more qualified than me, but I have a voice; I just need the extra space that the keyboard gives my mind to breathe. Katniss taught me something along the way. She shot her arrows to effect change, I can use the keyboard. America taught me something as well; if I keep silent, I am part of the problem. I may not be able to respond right away when someone says ‘feminism is a delusion’. But I will address it with flair and probably some sarcasm—eventually. I have a voice and I will use it.

The Choice

Melody Wilkinson

Synopsis of Part 1

Note: As noted in the Conclusion above, the creative component of this thesis is drawn predominantly from Part 2 of ‘The Choice’. The following synopsis of Part 1 is provided to orient the reader into the dystopian world inhabited by the characters. The creative component begins with the final chapter of Part 1.

In the first nine chapters of *The Choice* we meet Megan, who is nineteen. She lives in the USA in the near future. While the geographical boundaries remain, nothing of what its founding fathers created has survived—destroyed first by plague then the ensuing World War. Minor players now vie for positions of power vacated during the collapse of the infrastructure. Each state has become its own country, unstable but trying to rebuild a semblance of civilization. In Colorado, a civil war has erupted between Megan’s community (the majority of whom are female) living high in the Rocky Mountains, in a decommissioned YMCA camp, and the dictator, Isaac Holt, who has taken control of Downtown Denver. The people of Denver have traded their freedom for safety—especially the women. Megan is a soldier in the army fighting to keep control of the suburbs west of the city.

Megan (aka Alda, her last name, and how her fellow soldiers refer to her) was orphaned at fourteen when her mother died in the first wave of the plague. She survived horrible conditions in a refugee camp, but managed to emerge with her optimism and kindness intact. In this bleak new world these qualities are a hazard. Megan is frustrated by her commanding officers’ view that there is no humanity left in the soldiers fighting for the city. She is too trusting and refuses to shoot to kill. She is prone to distraction, out on patrol, due to her love of nature. It

is because of this that she loses focus and draws sniper fire on herself and her younger partner (and closest friend) Angela. Megan is shot in the shoulder and suffers a deep cut to her head. While recovering from her own injuries, Megan meets Finn, a young doctor in training, and a new friendship is formed. Angela's condition is very grave. Megan feels deep guilt and decides the only solution is to return to the front. This excerpt opens with Megan back on patrol with the unit dog, Charlie.

Chapter Ten

Megan

I can't get my feet to slow down and, before I know it, I'm running. Charlie senses my giddiness and takes off at full speed. They gave him to me today—as my partner is... recovering. I swallow the nauseous guilt from the conjured picture of Angela's grey body. I don't deserve to be happy, I know, but I'm back on Green Mountain and the sun is warming the cool fall air. The dirt and grass grind under each boot with a satisfying crunch. And I have Charlie, who hasn't learned to be depressed like everyone else. He usually spends his day on recon—scouting buildings we haven't cleared yet, but today he's my backup. No one knows what kind of dog he is but he's smart. His thick long fur is black with streaks and speckles of silver like a middle aged man's head. Halfway to the summit, I have to stop and catch my breath, my shoulder throbbing; he responds immediately, returning to check if I'm okay. He's so tall I don't have to reach down to scratch his ears.

'Good boy,' I smile and keep going, to let him know I'm fine. He trots along beside me at my slower pace. I take a deep breath in. It smells like Thanksgiving again. I see the sage just ahead and reach down to break off a bunch as we walk past. Then Charlie pauses, one paw up in the air, crouches low in the grass and a deep soft grumble comes from inside the back of his throat.

'What is it Charlie?'

He keeps growling and I follow his eyes to the grass just off the path. A small movement catches my eye and I look through the scope. A mountain lion. I take aim hitting the ground by his left paw—a warning shot, begging it to work. It does. He jumps back and is so fast he seems to disappear. A slight twitch of the grass is the only sign that he has gone over the north side of the Mountain. That's my first strike; I'm not out on a nature hike. Plus, there's something wrong with my aim. I was at least a foot off. So far, my new partner has proved, once again, that I'm the brittle and rusty joint in this war machine.

At the summit, I use my rifle scope to do a thorough sweep. I can see the truck that dropped me off moving north east, picking up soldiers and replacing them with new ones as if we are used paper towels. I lose sight of the fresh pair as they break the door down and enter a house. Opening my pack for Charlie's toy and my lunch, I take a seat on my rock. He curls up at my feet, gnawing on his bit of rope and I grab the apple. I salute Charlie with it.

'Was this from your latest triumph?'

He sighs and continues shredding the rope. I heard about a unit making a run for the western slope to see if any of the orchards had survived. They had but I didn't hear in what condition so I'm going to enjoy this as long as it lasts. I bite into it and close my eyes: the crunch and sour-sweet juice make me almost wish I hadn't eaten it. I'd forgotten how good they were. If we run out, or lose the orchard, I'll remember how to miss them again. The city is gleaming today; I can almost pretend that I will be meeting Mom there later for dinner. My stomach grumbles with the memory of clam sauce from—

My focus pulls in from the horizon and lands on the old TV tower that's just about a mile away. It had been cleared months ago but there's something about it today... I hold the apple in my teeth and bring the scope back up to my eye. The barbed wire fence looks fixed. Not properly or anything but someone has propped it up somehow.

I shove my food into my pack and take off. Charlie is at my heels. There's no cover between the tower and the summit—just flat land with the old trail cutting through the long grass. Even with the years of neglect the wide path, big enough for a truck, has barely been encroached by the growth around it. As if the grass learned to respect its boundary. I keep my gun at my shoulder but my left arm is shaking from the effort of holding it up. I have to drop it to my side, holding it only with my right hand.

My skin crawls with warning. Off the exposed summit, the quiet is held here in suspension. As if it has a secret. You can still hear the wind but it's above you somehow, racing off in currents from the mountain's peak. I jog the distance but my legs and lungs are already begging me to stop. I curse the five days I spent out of action. What is it with the body's inability to pick up where you left off? I scan the open plain around me as much as I can on the run but keep my eyes trained on the small building like it's one of those horrible jack-in-the-box toys with the scary clown inside. I watch Charlie too but he's relaxed.

As we near, I swing my gun back up to position. The gate has been repaired, but badly; some cable ties hang on, tense and desperate, as its heavy frame pulls against them, still leaning heavily inward. Charlie sits at my feet panting. I can't hear anything from inside so I grab my pocket knife and slice through the cable ties. The gate squeals open until its corner smacks the ground

where it has dug in, making a natural stop. This gate has been opened many times to make that groove. I step through, protecting my back as best I can. Charlie is alert, watching me for commands but his ears are relaxed. I click my tongue twice and he darts ahead, checking the perimeter for me. He gives me one bark and I lower my weapon.

I come around to the door; there's a shiny gold padlock on the latch. I just stare at it for a while. It feels like an algebra equation; I can't figure out why this place would have any value. It hasn't been in use since TV went digital, before the world ended, and the only people with access to TV now are in the city...on purpose.

I take out my kit and my eyes scan left and right as I pull out the little hook and metal stick. I'm alone. I slide the lock open with a click. The heavy metal door is stuck and I have to push hard to get it to grind open. The sunlight behind me is the only source of light. No windows; it's just a small office with barely enough space for the ancient computer, long dead. It seems to be tilting a bit as if it is too tired to hold its own weight. There's some electrical thing the size of a large file cabinet with knobs and dials and switches. I step over to an office chair and desk which are both dangerously clean but the thing I can't quite put into place in my brain is the candy wrappers all over the floor. Candy I haven't seen in years: Reece's Peanut Butter cups, Snickers. There's an old boom box and a stack of CDs. I suck in my breath. Neatly stacked on a high shelf are boxes of candy, the same as the wrappers. I tear into a box and am about to shove an entire Payday in my mouth when I stop. Reruns of my mom reading Hansel and Gretel to me play through in fast forward. But then what could possibly be gained from

leaving poison-laced candy in an abandoned place where no one ever comes? And what's with all the music?

'Well?' I ask Charlie but he just tilts his head as if he's sure he could help if he spoke better English. I sidle up to the CD stack and look at the first one. The Beatles. I knock it off with my pinkie finger as if it might be contaminated. The Red Hot Chili Peppers. I chew my lip and the candy starts to go gooey in my fingers. I turn the volume down on the boom box and squeeze my eyes shut as I hit play, waiting for the explosion. Instead, I hear a whirring and then a disjointed melody that doesn't seem to match a beat. It's too soft for my mind to put it all together. I turn up the volume one line on the dial at a time. The iconic slide and beat of *Come Together* fills up the small space. This is someone's little oasis. I nibble a bit of the end of the candy bar and focus all my taste buds on finding anything toxic. I hold the wrapper up to the light, inspecting it for holes. I take a bigger bite.

I turn up the music a little louder and can't avoid bouncing to its irresistible beat. I feel a tolerable amount of guilt as I take another bite. Although, who's likely to have a stash up here? Not any of my people...and if it's not one of my people it's one of theirs. I shove the rest of the bar in and grab another from the shelf, tearing off the wrapper.

Then it hits me, how is he (obviously a he) getting power? I flip the boom box over; the CD skips and I flick the battery compartment open; my eyes go wide. Batteries. C Batteries. This guy is well stocked. I'm tempted to steal the batteries but they're not rechargeable and I'm sure he's running them down to useless. So I just let it play and enjoy it. I pick my next piece of candy with more discrimination. My stomach is already warning me it's not used to this. Almond

Joy. The guilt still keeps peeking around each magical bite; I'm not used to keeping things for myself—not since I've lived in the Y-camp. Do I take as much candy as I can carry in my backpack or leave it here? More important than my moral dilemma is: he found it, hoarded it, and brought it here. Where did he get it, how did he hike it all the way up here and why?

I step back out and turn toward the city. I use my scope to look closer at the suburb that hugs the base of Green Mountain. It was abandoned years ago with the quarantine and then the reestablishment of the leadership in the city. Everyone moved there 'for the equal distribution of scarce resources and to keep them safe and defended from the radicals.' I don't see anything.

A movement catches my eye and I readjust the scope. A page from an old newspaper swirls around the street and I remember why I like to stay up on my mountain; nature looks okay without people, better even, but not places where people should be and no longer are. I duck back into the little office. Why would someone leave the city first of all? They have everything they need and more including all of this candy. We don't see much of it because we need to be as self-sufficient as possible. Medical supplies are risky enough. But why would someone so well 'provided for' in the city be way out here? I step out again confusing Charlie as he follows me in and out. I think about heading back to the summit but there's something that tells me I need to check out the neighborhood below. If people are coming out of the city and settling, we need to know who they are and what they want.

I call it in.

'Green Six.'

‘Go Green Six.’

‘I found a stash of food in the old TV tower. It looks like some sort of hide out. Where’s Green Mountain Five?’

‘North four clicks.’

‘Permission to investigate further?’ I wait.

‘You’re cleared to enter sector five. If it’s clear, can you manage the food on your own?’

I eye the boxes of candy. Maybe if I eat a few more...’I think so.’

‘Roger that, we’re out in three hours. Make it quick Alda.’

‘Copy that. Green Six out. Charlie come,’ I say and he’s at my side as I take off straight down the hill. I stay off the trail for most of my descent, keeping hidden, as the well-trodden path runs along the most exposed edge of the mountain.

It takes a good twenty minutes for me to jog down and I find myself in the old parking lot. The trail head sign with the map is yellowed from lack of care but you can still see the warning of rattlesnakes and to keep pets on a leash. At this point, my canine companion would warn me of rattlesnake danger before I would even remember to look.

I step out onto the road so pockmarked from the changing seasons. It was a never-ending battle before; the city kept a lot of jobs filled just keeping on top of the roads. The dramatic change in seasons was one of the things everyone who lived here loved about Colorado but it made for temperamental asphalt. The

breathing earth wasn't meant to be sealed shut. I pick my way across the broken road. Then, I'm standing at my crossroads wondering what to do next.

This is where the city meets the country and there's no real break in the neat rows of houses and strip malls between here and downtown until you get to the barrier. They made a wall (well, most of it is a fence) using the old I25 highway as the line. What am I doing here? The oasis guy could have come from anywhere. But then why there? He could be holed up in any one of the millions of houses between here and the city. Why did he pick that spot? Whatever he's escaping from has to be close.

I decide I'll do a sweep of a few houses but not go more than two blocks in. This isn't my territory but still...there aren't enough of us; we've been pretty lucky that the men have wanted to stay confined in the city. As I approach the first house, I realize I haven't called in my new position. I roll my eyes at my stupidity. Too late now, the silence here is already magnifying every footstep; even Charlie's clicking claws sound like wild clapping. My crackling walkie would draw too much attention. And there's something very unthreatening about the candy/music loving guy. It seems a bit mean to take his carefully chosen hideaway when he was doing nothing more than attempting to put himself in a sugar coma. I pass the flower pots that look like frozen volcanoes of grass and weeds. The lawn is dead; a matted mesh of mud and grass that will never be green again. I angle my back to the house and try the screen door. It squeaks open and then I try the door. It's locked. I click my tongue and Charlie takes off around the back.

I peek in through a grimy window and the house looks as dead as the grass. Then my eye catches something down the street. It's a kid—younger than

me; a boy, walking as if he's heading to his neighbor's house for some cookies and a PlayStation marathon. It feels like a hallucination except his dirty face and clothes match the desolate surroundings. I raise my scope and see his blue eyes bright in the afternoon sun. As he comes closer I step out, gun raised.

'Hey!' I shout and he freezes, candy bar in mid-bite. His face drains of color. 'What're you doing out here?'

He swallows the bite and his eyes flick to the left. Towards the safety a house could provide.

'Don't even think about it. I'll shoot.'

His eyes flick again and he takes off.

'Dang it,' I say under my breath. I can't trust my aim so I chase him. I can't shoot the candy eating kid. He disappears into the dark interior of a house, the sun outside concealing what's inside. I sprint in after him and all I see are shadows but too many are moving and shouting. My eyes adjust and my ears hear: 'Drop it.'

It's quiet and coming from my left but any one of the men pointing weapons at me could have said it. 'I said, drop it.' I count the men in the room: ten. I calculate how many I could take out before I die and then my eyes rest on the smug chocolate covered face of the boy. Charlie comes charging in then and leaps at one of the men. I hear the shot and he hits the floor.

'No!' It comes out strangled and before I know what I'm doing I've fired my weapon at the man who shot him.

‘Hold your fire!’ I hear on my right then something heavy slams into me from that direction and I hit the floor. My shoulder feels like it’s burst open and all the air forced out of my lungs. I can’t breathe and my weakened arms have dropped the gun. I kick hard at the body pinning me to the floor and my head ricochets from punch to the side of my head blurring my vision.

‘Don’t mess up her face!’

Someone brushes back the hair from my face while another hand presses my head keeping it pinned to the floor. The guy is big—I think—it’s hard to tell from an angle that is making me feel as small and useless as possible. I don’t stop kicking, even though my legs are being restrained. ‘I think we have a candidate here boys.’

There’s laughter at that as I feel fingers slide my sleeve up. As my vision clears I can see I’ve missed my target and the boy has crumpled to the floor. His blond hair still holds its tight ringlets as the red seeps in. No one is helping him and his blue eyes stare back at me—my first kill.

‘Don’t worry. We’ll just put you to sleep for a little while. You’ll wake up to your new life!’ I feel a pinch and I keep kicking until everything goes black.

Part Two

Chapter Eleven

Megan

I wake up to an odd soft hum I can't identify. I have to work to open my eyes as if someone is holding my eyelids shut. It's the smell that finally does it. Bacon. I leap to my feet. It's not just bacon. There's a small round table set with eggs, sausages and pancakes with a huge gravy boat filled with maple syrup. I shove two pieces of bacon in my mouth. While I'm chewing on that, I wrap two more in the pancake and dunk them into the syrup, sloshing it over the sides and onto a tablecloth that is so white I am pretty sure I'm hallucinating. It's so clean.

I freeze. Where am I? It looks like a hotel room from before. Everything is too clean. The bed I jumped off beckons me back with the giant gold pillows and blinding white duvet that still holds my outline in a deep depression. I walk to the window. My feet cool as they leave the soft fibers of the rug and then hit cold hardwood floors polished so that there isn't a single scratch. Long, heavy, off-white drapes pool on the floor as if the room is so rich it wastes even the nicest fabric. I push them aside and vertigo hits. The solid ground I'm standing on sways as I realize just how far off the ground I am. I can see all the way to the snow covered peaks of the Front Range.

The bacon and pancakes stick in my throat. I'm in the city. The afternoon sun flashes the image of Charlie lying dead and the room full of men with guns. Just before I...I drop the rest of my bacon taco on the floor and stumble back into

the corner of the room, knocking over a green and black striped arm chair. I force my breathing to slow. I'm barefoot and wearing some sort of white linen shirt that comes to my knees and matching flowing pants like I'm about to be baptized into some sort of cult. Who changed my clothes? The question hits my stomach with an icy fist and spreads cold fear outward. My shoulder is throbbing. I peel back the sleeve of my shirt and the fresh bandage that covers it. It has been restitched.

I race from the room and find myself in a large apartment. It even has a kitchen, bigger than the one in our old house. As I race for the door someone steps through another door behind me. I whirl around, fists raised, ready for whatever comes. But it's a girl my age or slightly younger her orange red hair pulled into a tight bun. She has towels in her hands and is dressed as a maid. But the thing that is making me feel like I really am in an alternate universe is her smile. It's bright and there's no hint of the darkness that clouds everyone's face since the world died. Maybe it was her; maybe a girl changed my clothes. I grab this thought and pull myself toward its hope like doing chin ups in basic training—trusting the bar bolted into the wall with my whole body.

'Can I get you anything Miss Alda?'

My lips force themselves into a thin line. They doubt my too trusting brain, which already likes this girl.

'I'm Abby,' she tries. Her light blue uniform brings out the green of her eyes. In which, I can't see the calculating timer of death that ticks in the eyes of everyone else. 'I'm here to look after anything you could need or want.' The smile is still there, brighter now as she offers her assistance.

'Where exactly is here?'

Her eyes shift around the room as if she's looking for what could possibly be unclear to me. 'The...The Four Seasons?'

I need to go. I turn and as I'm reaching for the door it swings open, slamming into my outstretched hand.

'Ah you're awake! Excellent!' The man's face falls as he sees me cringe and rub my hand. 'Oh I'm so sorry my dear, did I injure you?' He's older but well dressed and put together. He wears his age like an expensive overcoat, like it is more of a distinction rather than a hindrance. His thick silver hair hints at its original black color and is sculpted into a precise style that matches the perfection of the room. But his smile doesn't quite fit—it's the most terrifying thing about where I am.

'What the fuck is this?' My mother said I would know the moment when only a swear word would do. This seems like the right time.

He turns to the maid, with his hands behind his back and nods at her. 'Thank you so much Abby. I'll have Miss Alda buzz if she needs you.'

The way she looks at him with awe and something else...it's how young girls used to look when they met their celebrity crush—back when there were celebrities. As the door clicks shut behind her, my skin seems to shrink begging me not to be alone in the room with this guy.

'Miss Alda, I would like to formally welcome you to the city!' The words are right but from another time. And my body takes a step back. His hands raise and his eyes are sympathetic. 'Miss Alda, we mean you no harm.'

‘My experience with your soldiers begs to differ with you.’ I look for something I can use as a weapon. Kicking myself for not doing this first. He laughs a deep, genuine laugh.

‘Oh. You’re not just beautiful! There’s wit in there as well! You will be a favorite I’m sure.’

I feel betrayed by my own body with the thrill I get at the compliment. A compliment from the enemy is like flowers on a shallow grave—but I’m a sucker for flowers.

‘Let’s start again shall we? I’m Don Juniper. I am the host of the television show *The Choice*.’ He waits as if I should know what this is. He purses his lips. ‘Of course: you have been living outside the city and wouldn’t have heard! Things must just be awful for you out there!’

My eyes flick back and forth trying to connect his words.

‘Anyway, you have been selected! And this is not just any season. This season our Bachelor is John Holt!’ He waits again for me to react. I recognize the name but more like the way you remember a history fact that you learn and then disregard following the test.

‘He’s our illustrious leader’s son.’ There’s something about the way he’s speaking and holding himself as if we aren’t the only people in the room. But my body, on hyper alert, knows we’re alone. The previous day’s events replay through my mind: Charlie, the drugs that put me out for who knows how long. In fact, I don’t even know if it was yesterday.

‘What do you mean, I’ve been selected?’

‘Yes! Well it is quite the honor! Most of the girls applied months ago and have gone through exciting first rounds. But...each season, one spot is reserved for a lucky lady from the outside.’ It’s then that he looks up at the corner of the room. I trace the trajectory of his eyes and see a black dome that looks like a mini version of the domes that held security cameras in the old days.

‘Are we being watched?’ My words come out as a whisper through the fear that is constricting the muscles around my vocal cords.

‘Yes!’ He spreads his arms wide and turns up the power of his professional smile. ‘The whole city is watching! And already cheering for you. Isn’t that right, Denver?!’ He cups a hand over his ear like he’s listening ‘Haha! Yes! There they are.’

I swallow hard. I don’t hear anything. ‘What is this?’ I sound desperate. I don’t like it.

‘Well the show was started three years ago and all of our bachelor’s picks are still happily joined with their prince. And now it’s your turn to find everlasting love.’ There goes his arms again spread wide toward his invisible audience.

‘It’s a pageant to find a wife?’ My mind is racing to fit this surreal scene into what I already know about the city.

‘Haha! My dear, it is so much more than a pageant. It is a series of events to test your compatibility and...’ he laughs and winks at the corner again. ‘Beauty does play a big part! And who said anything about a wife?’

‘Why would John Holt need to go through this when the men in the city take who they want when they want them?’

His face scrunches in concern. ‘My dear, I’m afraid you are mistaken. Understandable considering the brainwashing you have undoubtedly received to justify this senseless war.’ He folds his hands and bows his head as if in prayer. ‘We here in the city are, I’m afraid, misrepresented by those who would seek to divide what is left of humanity and this planet.’

My mind is racing. Something about his words—it’s like finding the missing note in a piece of music. This is why I haven’t been killing soldiers. I just wasn’t ready to believe humanity had sunk so low. It doesn’t help that the room still smells of the food that has filled my stomach more than it has been in years. It makes me want to believe everything he’s saying just so I can eat more. My stance relaxes a bit and I see a small, almost imperceptible shift in Don like he’s highly tuned too and knows already what I’m thinking.

‘You’ve suspected that for a while haven’t you? That what you are being told is not true?’ He takes a step toward me and I press my lips together again. My CO’s warnings about being too trusting echo through my head. Although, they didn’t kill me out there. But then why did they drug me? I guess I was holding a gun on them and I did kill... that horrible image of the boy flashes into my mind. I feel so off balance as if running down a sand dune. I have nothing to grab onto and I’m being pulled down on a sliding sheet of conflicting ideas.

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘Of course you have a choice.’ He laughs loudly. ‘Although this place here is a perk of being on the show...’ He spreads his arms wide and I see the first break in his smooth as porcelain demeanor—there’s a threat there. ‘But who doesn’t want to find love!’ Again to the camera and the crack is gone. ‘And you

already have fans! They've been watching since you were selected in the suburbs just three days ago. We have all been waiting for you to wake up!

Three days. This keeps spinning in my brain. I was out for three days and they were watching when I killed that boy. Again, as if he can read my thoughts he says,

'Yes it was unfortunate, the death of Danny Baylor Jr. It really was heart wrenching.' A pause as if for a planned moment of silence. 'But we all know that this is war and you were acting under lies masquerading as orders.' There's the solemn head bowing again. 'However, if you choose *not* to see that we are *not* what you have been told and *refuse* to participate in one of our most cherished celebrations of love, then the officials will have no choice but to put you on trial for murder.' Murder. The word flicks in between my ears making my head hurt. Since when is death in war considered murder?

'It will be a quick trial I must say since the entire city was a witness. And I'm afraid that the penalty of this is death.' Words like trial and penalty and death aren't mixing—they separate out and float like lumps of flour in gravy.

'We cannot provide refuge for murderers!' He says this last part with his biggest smile so far, as if the death penalty is the punchline of a joke.

It seems like the silence stretches out, pulling tension so tight like just before a rubber band snaps back on your fingers.

'But no one wants that! As I said, you already have fans. Just look.' With only the wave of his hand, the giant TV on the wall comes alive and there's a crowd of people cheering outside somewhere, some of them are holding signs with my name on them. How do they know my name? 'And just for more proof,

because I can see the doubt still there on your face...' He wiggles a finger at me and laughs as he steps toward the sliding glass door. He opens it and steps out on the balcony. At first all I hear is the wind and then, faintly, the cheering. I take tentative steps toward him.

He laughs again. 'I assure you I do not bite, despite what you have been told.' He motions for me to join him. I step through and peek over the railing—there's a crowd ten deep and covering the whole city block. When my face appears, the cheering gets louder. I can't process it. I look between Don and the crowd and the Rocky Mountains stretching out in front of me.

'Well my dear, what do you say?'

'I need a minute.'

'Of course, only don't take too long—the ceremony starts tonight!' More cheers.

I stumble back into the bedroom and trip over the square of carpet, white with grey wavy lines that start to move. I don't try to catch myself. I just let the stumble take me all the way to the floor as I try to steady my breathing. I'm on my knees. I cross my arms over my stomach and breathe deeply, closing my eyes. As I open them and look up at the ceiling I see another of the little domes in the corner. I am still on camera.

Chapter Twelve

Megan

I've felt like I was falling all day. Nothing about where I am and what I'm doing makes any sense. I've been fed and not just nourished, but indulging in cheese-filled pastries and strawberries—real strawberries dipped in chocolate. And then there's the way that I'm treated, it's as if they know something about me that I don't know, like my mother was really the Queen of France. I can't connect the fear I felt of the city while looking at it from a distance, to the comfort and kindness I've experienced since I woke up, wrapped in their soft blankets. But with all the 'misunderstandings' that occurred to get us into this mess, I'm less inclined to look for the threat hiding inside of the golden puff pastry sitting on the table next to me.

Of course, if I'm to really focus on the 'kindness', I have to forget about the fact that I was drugged and brought here against my will. Not to mention I'm now participating in some sort of television show. I haven't given my consent to Don but I guess not protesting, and the fact that I didn't object to being squished into this vice of a dress, substitutes for verbal consent. He'd left by the time I had finished panicking and I spent the rest of my day spinning in and out of rooms in my apartment—with each open door I feel more trapped, and I emerge with redder lips and perfected hair and eventually pressed into this dress. They literally ironed it while it was on me. It was like a weird magic trick—*abracadabra*—you are grown up and beautiful.

The giant TV has been running all day. The news is showcasing all of Holt's accomplishments and his 'bravery under such adversity.' They're completely glossing over the story that I live in flashbacks every day. I remember my Mom's frustration during a particularly strange Presidential election year. It had turned into a joke. Everyone knew that the President was no longer a public servant elected by the people but, instead, was bought by the highest bidder. But instead of fighting the corruption, the people watched and joked and laughed as the corporations bought their man the most powerful seat in the world. These corporations then went unchecked and the greatest act of terrorism was committed on American soil by American citizens.

They're showing brief footage of the war that ensued but no responsibility is being taken.

They hadn't made the connection to the antidepressants so the newly-elected trigger-happy President claimed it was the Muslim states who were trying to get rid of our women. A series of 'strategic' military retaliatory strikes lead to all-out war. Once it came out that it was an American company that was responsible, it was too late. Weapons of mass destruction had been used and war was everywhere. Martial Law was declared here in the States and then it was every Country and State for themselves.

I study my reflection in the mirror as if seeing myself there will somehow anchor me back to the ground. I feel like a helium balloon being dragged around by a child; moving forward but not in control and with a sense of fragility that at any moment I will brush by something sharp and burst. All my freckles are long gone. I can't even see the wound on my head unless I look really close. But there's about an inch of makeup on my face so that makes sense. I look like I'm

off to Prom. Or what I imagined I would look like if I was off to Prom—if I had turned out to be a version of myself that valued the placement of my breasts in prominent positions.

It's not that I don't like dressing up—I could spend a whole Saturday night trying on my mom's dresses; short on her but on me, they were ball-gown length. This one is long too but it's only pretending to cover me. It's like the blue lace flowers were painted on my body and the fabric that covers my legs feels like it will disintegrate if you touch it more than once. It's tight like its burrowing into my skin, makes me stand straighter, as if I could somehow squeeze out of the top of it, giving me more room. I don't like it. I normally love blue. But this blue, I guess it would be called electric, feels like it's screaming its color at me.

I cringe as the wife of the mayor or president, or whatever the heck they're calling that Holt guy, is in a commercial selling a new 'guaranteed safe' antidepressant. I look down at my dress. I look like her, all cut out in decorated proportions, like the angel that we put on the top of our Christmas tree—all sparkle, no fight. I don't like it. According to her, this one is not only safe from the virus but helps you lose those unsightly pounds.

My body feels cold with the memory of my mother taking her 'new' antidepressant that her doctor told her had less side effects. She stood at the counter and stared at the thing in her hand for a long time. As if she knew she shouldn't take it. But we were running late as usual, so she popped it in her mouth, chased it down with water and grabbed her keys. Sometimes that three step process plays on a loop in my head. I'm standing with my school bag over my shoulder and, when I'm dreaming, I manage to slap the pill out of her hand. Her instincts were always right and the one time she didn't trust them it cost her

life. The bioengineered virus had been put in this particular version of the pill that was being handed out like candy in those days. My mother died just a few weeks after that first dose and I hid out in our home. As everything fell apart, people were too busy to notice a thirteen year old hadn't been put into 'the system'. But when the soldiers came to our neighborhood and told us we had to go, I believed them and got on that damned bus to the refugee camp.

Despite my dislike of the dress, I can't stop staring at the shoes. They have scrubbed and buffed my toenails and put a French tip polish on them. And the shoes fit perfectly—they are strappy, silver and make my feet look like I'm a movie star. They criss-cross and loop around making six little infinity figures. But the best part is, they sort of shimmer when I turn my foot back and forth in the light. As if they have the ability to spit out whispers of different colors whenever they feel like it. The catch to my shiny shoes appears to be that I can't take a step in them. My foot feels like it will slide forward and I've already stepped completely out of them three times. They dangled behind me as they hung by the ankle strap. I take a couple more practice steps. I decide not to rely on the heel at all and just walk on my tip toes. I'm not sure how long I can keep this up but figure, if I need a break, I can at least stand still in them.

I reach to grab the remote with my fingertips so I don't have to take a step in the shoes, to turn up the volume. But I can't reach without having to walk. Turns out I don't need to hear; there's a graphic with a list growing as they remind viewers of the rules.

∞ Women are not allowed outside without a man for safety reasons

- ∞ No gatherings of more than three people at one time
- ∞ No one out after eight pm without a permit
- ∞ No carrying of weapons of any kind

This last one stays up for a while so I assume they're listing possible weapons. Probably most of the things I turned into weapons when I was on my own. I had a knife in every room of the house. Once, I found a gun. I wasn't sure if it worked and I was so terrified of the noise it might make, I never tried to use it. But just having it in my hands—I thought it would give me a head start to run. The living conditions in Denver had been deteriorating, but it was particularly bad for women. Since the infected were overwhelmingly women, a fear of them developed. And when you fear something you begin to blame it; and when you blame it you begin to hate it. And, in order to hate another human, it has to be less than you and, if it has less value than you, then there's just that one last small step to violence. At first, I remember, the women in my neighborhood were just hiding, fearing the virus; but then there were groups of men forming vigilante groups going from house to house killing the women. The first time I fired a gun in basic training, I almost threw up from the sound. My body remembering the fear twisting my stomach—pulling me in so small I could fit in my mother's hope chest. That's where I slept most nights.

Violence in general was barely being dealt with but violence against women was almost encouraged. As long as you could prove they were symptomatic there was no punishment no matter the severity of the assault. Of course symptomatic could be a fever which, by the time anyone in authority arrived—if they ever did—the body was cold. So women were leaving by the

hundreds, creating their own society. Then Holt built the wall. Once we were organized in Estes, we tried to take back control of the city. The attempt failed and a mini civil war erupted. I guess it worked in Isaac Holt's favor, though, because it looks like he owns everything now. No one except for soldiers were allowed to leave the City after that.

‘Are you ready Miss Alda?’

I see Abby's reflection in the mirror behind me. The reality of her standing there is what reminds me my shiny shoes are not glass slippers. The lace around my wrists seems to tighten until I can feel the pulse in the tips of each of my fingers. I can't answer her. I am not ready.

‘Miss?’

I turn and take some steps on the balls of my feet. Her shocked intake of breath makes me whip around to assess the threat but, as I spin, my ankle buckles and because the things are on both feet, when I try to catch myself, the other ankle turns and I fall. She comes to my side with a concerned look on her face but her eyes are laughing at me.

‘It's okay to laugh. I must look ridiculous.’

She lets out a giggle then and helps me to my feet. ‘You'd think you've never worn heels!’

I feel the expression on my face should be enough of an answer but she still seems baffled.

‘Never?’

‘Heels are not really forest-friendly.’

‘Oh, you poor thing! You must be living like animals out there! We just hear the most awful stories.’

Something about this makes my chest tighten. I’ve loved living in the mountains from day one. But I don’t want to say it out loud. As if saying how much I love my home will make the chocolate, clean sheets and endless hot showers disappear, as if I’ve been wearing virtual reality glasses and the power gets cut. All of this will dissolve like those cheesy cartoons that would wave away the dream world and all that is left is a half bombed-out city with girls passed around like party food. And if this is an illusion, shattering it would force me to choose based on principles. Not that I wouldn’t be willing to die but die for *what*? Would my death make any progress toward peace? I don’t think anyone would even notice and I’m not willing to die for nothing.

‘Okay—crash course. You have to relax your hips and knees. A little like this...’ She bounces on her knees a few times and I notice then that she’s wearing a pair of heels herself, smaller than the ones I’m teetering on, but heels none-the-less. ‘Then you want to walk intentionally heel to toe and take shorter steps.’ She does a little demonstration. ‘Now, the secret is, you want to walk in as a straight line as possible, which will sway those gorgeous hips and make the guys crazy.’

‘For my hips?’ I’m not sure I want someone to be crazy about my hips. Crazy about me, sure, but a body part that can be found on the very next person you meet. What’s romantic about that?

‘Well honey, your hips are just to catch their eye and keep them looking. Then you just have to get them to like the rest of you.’ There’s something a little

desperate in her voice that doesn't match the girl talk. I try again with a couple of laps around the room with Abby trailing after me like I'm learning to ride a bike. Eventually I feel that I can get from A to B but the real problem is the way they make me feel like I'm shackled—like if there was any danger I would just have to let it overtake me. There's no way I could run away in these. I need to take that in to account when I get the chance to run. I jump at a loud banging on the door.

'Five minutes!'

'Oh, this is so exciting! It's time to get you down there.' Abby walks out with me to the hallway and then she's replaced by two large men in suits with squiggly wires coming out of their ears. I look back over my shoulder and Abby gives me a wave. Their size forces us to squash into the elevator like when I used to stuff play dough into the spaghetti maker. My stomach drops before the doors even close. They look like security but they feel like human prison bars rather than protection. I wonder, as we descend, how you make matching giant men. I would say they were twins but one has dark skin and a shaved head and the other is pale with a blond buzz cut. Maybe they grow them in a mold. I think it's a bit clichéd that they are wearing sunglasses and the amusement from this is almost enough to calm me down.

I'm not carrying anything as we descend, which feels weird and, for the first time, I realize I have nothing of my own. I don't know where my backpack went and with that comes the image of Charlie. I swallow the lump that climbs up my throat when I think of him dying to save me and then—the boy—his eyes were blue just like mine.

I'm blinded by white flashing light as the doors open and I step back, pressing myself against the elevator wall. Strong fingers dig into my upper arms and we walk out. My high heels, it turns out, are not a problem since they're practically carrying me. They shove me through the flashing lights and people shouting my name, through double doors and into a small room filled with girls all tightly bound in extravagant dresses of their own.

It's a rainbow of the same irritating electric spectrum of colors. There's a strange quiet. I haven't been in a room with this many girls, where the only sound is swishing lace and whispers that could either be from the satin brushing the carpet, or a couple of girls unable to take the tension of the silence. I can't tell.

'Meredith!' A short man with a clipboard and wild, long thinning hair tangled around a headset, shouts from the other end of the room where another set of double doors is closed. A red-headed girl takes a deep breath and twists her panicked face into a smile fit for a magazine cover. The flashing lights, as she steps through, hide what else is out there and my skin feels tighter as if the dress is embedding itself into me. I have no idea what is expected of me out there. I pick a dark-haired girl who reminds me a little of Angela. She's sitting on the gold-leaf upholstered couch, ankles crossed, hands folded in her lap. She seems to fit in this space as if the room auditioned her and she won the role of princess.

'Hey, I'm Megan.' I try to speak quietly but my voice makes her jump and the quiet of the room seems to still even more as everyone turns toward the sound. I clear my throat. I've got all their attention now. I may as well get some answers.

'What's going on in there?'

Twenty pairs of eyes flick back and forth: some are rolling at my stupidity; some can't seem to believe I'm speaking; and a few hold some sympathy or pity—I'm not sure but I don't like its implication. When I begin to think no one will speak, the princess beside me says, in a voice that sounds like quiet has been practiced, 'It's the reveal.'

She rolls her eyes at the blank look on my face and the soft nervous rustling begins again as girls shift from foot to foot. Another girl is called but I can't see her leave—just the room growing brighter from the camera flashes.

'When we meet John—' she waits, but I can't seem to help her out—the Bachelor.'

The guy I'm supposed to impress to avoid the death penalty. I nod. And she goes back to studying her perfectly pink fingernails.

'What are we supposed to do when we get in there?'

She sighs. 'Just cross the stage, shake his hand and don't speak unless he asks you a question.' She stands and slides silently away. I feel my lower lip slip out in a pout at the flawless steps she takes in her heels, hips swaying making her red dress swirl around her legs like water.

With each call and disappearance of a girl the tension increases until I'm alone in the room. As if the others' presence held the protection of anonymity. With each exit it's like they took a piece of my clothing and I'm about to walk out into a crowd totally naked. I eye the door I came in and teeter across the room. I click it open a fraction to see two clone versions of the men who brought me here and the foyer still filled with people. I let the door close and sigh, sliding into the closest chair to the door. I just need a minute to get my head around this.

‘Megan,’ the man says without looking at me. I stand but don’t take a step until I feel both feet connected and solid on the short tan carpet. Then, all I have to do is put one foot in front of the other. I’m concentrating so hard on following the heels of the man’s shoes, I don’t look up at the cameras; and then I pause. Stairs. I chew on the inside of my cheek and then a hand reaches out in front of me. I look up to the face of a very handsome man—older than me—I’m not sure by how much but it feels like too much. His dark hair is perfectly sculpted in a wave—up and off his forehead. I don’t like his eyes. They don’t match the gesture or the smile. They’re blue which is fine but they hold something...

‘Miss Alda. I presume.’

I take his hand for two reasons. First, I’ll fall if I try to get up the steps on my own and second, because his eyes hold a threat, that’s the word I was looking for. They hold the clear threat of my position here. There’s an audible ‘aww’ as I take his hand and he helps me up the stairs. When I’m on flat ground again, I try to take my hand back but he holds it tighter. Our hands suspended high between us as if he’s putting me on display.

‘Welcome to *The Choice* Miss Alda.’

I whip my head to the left—it’s Don Juniper, who told me this was my choice.

‘John, do you have any questions for Miss Alda?’

‘Well I guess my most important question is, and I’m sure our audience shares my curiosity, does she really want to be here? Since her only other option is criminal charges, how can I be sure she wants to win my hand?’ He and the huge audience (which seems to materialize out of nowhere) laugh. My death

sentence, it seems, is a popular recurring joke. I catch a glimpse of my face in a TV at the side of the room. I look pale, even for me, and my eyes are wide and wild like the raccoon that got trapped in our trash one winter. I close my eyes and give myself three seconds to reset and find that place in the center of my body that I go when I'm in the middle of the pack in a ten-mile run. That little place of light that lets me overcome the fatigue and push my muscles farther. I open my eyes and smile.

‘Well, I don't know you but I'm sure getting to know you will be better than being prosecuted.’ I stand straighter as the crowd laughs at this. His grip loosens a little but he doesn't let go.

‘Well, I look forward to proving you right,’ he says, but pulls on my hand directing me stage right where the others are smiling and stiff as if they are posing for a group photo. I find my gap and stand beside the other girls.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen: your Season Three bachelorettes!’ Don Juniper says. The room behind the cameras disappears for a moment while they flash again. ‘Enjoy the refreshments!’ The girls disperse into the crowd, microphones in their faces—they're talking with prim animated expressions and all look like pros.

I manage to get off the stage without breaking anything and try to blend into the surroundings. I step behind one of the long tables in a U shape around the perimeter of the room. It gives me the sense of a barrier. I stand behind one of the giant vases of flowers. The bouquets have no stems and, because the glass is so clean, if you look at it from just the right angle you can't see the vases at all. The perfect round bunches of purple, yellow and red roses seem to be suspended in

mid-air. The chandelier looks like someone has blown bubbles and trapped them in a clear rectangular box.

I hear the screaming outside first. No one inside reacts until the double doors slam open and bodies covered in black Kevlar with masked faces burst in, screaming for everyone to get down. I hit the floor as the room erupts in chaos. I roll under the table and push the white table cloth back into place. I hear someone on the other side of my hiding place. It sounds like they're doing a news report but the words are wrong: 'exciting' and 'thrilling', not terrifying and tragic.

A shot forces the crowd's silence.

'We're taking the girls and anyone who wants to stop us can try but we'll shoot.'

I lift the edge of the table cloth a fraction of an inch as the girls are hauled one by one screaming from the room. I drop it as I see one of the men speak to the guy who seems to be in charge.

'Well, well it looks like we're missing one! No problem; I'll just shoot one person for every minute I have to wait here.'

I swear under my breath. It has to be a bluff. I hear a scream and pick the tablecloth up just a fraction. I see a woman in a mini skirt flailing against the man who holds the gun to her head. If it's a bluff it's a good one.

'Thirty seconds...'

I squeeze my eyes shut.

'Fifteen...ten...five...'

There's a shot and a scream. It seems like I blink and her leg is drowning in blood. I didn't even see the shot go off.

I roll out. I don't need any more deaths on my conscience.

'Well—that was easy!' The man laughs. My arms are yanked behind me and I make sure to clench my fists as tight as I can and cross my wrists. Praying they don't notice. I feel the zip-tie go on tight and I breathe out. The ties feel just like they did back at camp in the training session on how to break out of restraints. I lose my footing, though, as I'm dragged out to a black van with no windows and thrown in. The other girls are in there, not all of them but about half. They're huddled against each other, most are crying. It's a weird pathetic sort of crying. Like those soap operas my mom and I used to make fun of. I feel guilty for judging these girls but one of them is actually complaining that her dress got ripped. As the van lurches forward, I close my eyes, memorizing every turn and trying to count the seconds between them. I give up on that right away because I can't tell how fast we're going. My shoulder is starting to throb but I think the stitches are holding.

We come to a stop and one girl is yanked from the van and then we're off again. I've lost track of how many turns but I can tell we're going in a circle so now I keep my attention on that. We continue to drop girls off in this bus-stop horror show. I'm trying to work out how to get all of us out of here but as I look around, all I see are high heels and tears streaking makeup down beautiful faces. Even if I could get them out when we stopped, how could we run away before anyone noticed? The image of the boy lying dead flickers at the edge of my conscience. If I try to get them out will I cause all of their deaths too?

I'm fifth to get out. Because it was dark in the van, my eyes are adjusted and I can clearly see I'm on some sort of old farm—the smells still remain of animals that I don't see. I'm dragged to a barn that looks like it will fall if you tap on it just the right way, and shoved onto a chair in the center of the room—my feet are tied to the chair with rope.

The men leave without a word, sliding the door into place and I'm in total darkness again. I take a few deep breaths and listen as the van pulls away. I can't tell if they left anyone behind until I hear footsteps crunching on the gravel outside. It sounds like one person and I smile to myself. I work on uncrossing my wrists. The zip tie is tight. I close my eyes. I twist and wriggle a fraction of an inch at a time until my thumb is out and my top hand is free. Then I can work the knots in the rope around my feet.

The old straw covering the floor keeps my footsteps quiet as I approach the door. I can hear whoever it is out there, pacing. So I make my way around the perimeter, feeling my way for weak points or structural damage. I come to a hole in the side of the building.

I kneel down—it's a jagged hole but I should be able to squeeze through. I lay flat on my stomach and scoot along the ground. My head is through and I force one shoulder then the other through the opening. I feel each scrape from the jagged wood but I can already taste freedom. I force my hips through, the dress snags and the wood makes one final stab to my left hip and then I'm outside, suspicious now about the stupidity of my kidnappers. I see Denver to my left so I trace the night sky until I see the black outline of my mountains. I'm south east of the city and it looks like I'm about nine miles out. I run that on a daily basis.

I take off running from the back side of the barn, hoping that will give me cover for a while. The stupid shoes are making my progress ridiculous. No one is following, so I stop and break off the heels with a rock. It's loud. I hear movement from behind me. It's the barn door being opened. I take off. It's still awkward because my toes now point upwards but at least my feet are protected from the dry rocky ground and I can run faster. I hear a man shout and then a beam of light flashes side to side and then back to me. I don't even pause as he shouts for me to stop. But I'm too slow, with the shoes slick on the bottom; I'm unable to get a grip. He grabs me from behind but I easily break his hold doing nothing particularly fancy. I run again but he runs past me and I pull up short as he aims his 9mm at my forehead. He raises his light so I can't see his face.

'What're you doing?'

I almost laugh at the absolute insanity of a kidnapper questioning why their victim is running away after a successful escape. I don't laugh but I can't quite figure out how to answer him. So I assess the threat he poses. I still can't see his face but I can make out the shape of his body. He's about four inches taller than me and cardboard cut-out strong. Like he auditioned for the role of muscle and got it. I'm guessing that he didn't get his strength from hand to hand combat but from reps at some gym. I'm pretty sure I can take him or at least take his gun. I hear a car or something approaching but keep my eyes trained on him and sure enough his head flicks to the right and I relieve him of his weapon easily, shoving his hand to the left and grabbing his wrist. I step back so I can hold the gun center target on his chest and the approaching vehicle. My stomach drops as I see a van approaching—his friends are back.

There's no cover anywhere near where I am now, so running for it is a stupid choice. I stand my ground hoping that holding the gun will cause a delay long enough for me to negotiate. But as the van skids to a stop, kicking up its own little dust storm, a stream of lights and well-dressed people holding microphones pour out. Just as I had done, the guy uses my temporary distraction to take his gun back and holds it up. But this is by far the least surreal thing that has happened to me today, let alone in this moment, so I barely react. Why are the reporters here, with no law enforcement or even the rest of this guy's gang? I mean, I know law enforcement is struggling but I can't compute why a television show knows where I am and is now filming me and my kidnapper out in the middle of nowhere.

A black car now approaches and a man in a suit gets out. It's John the bachelor striding toward us buttoning his coat on the way. Then in one motion John approaches, swings a punch and muscle man is on the ground holding his nose. Blood is pouring out between his fingers. I keep replaying in my mind when John hits him because there was no sound. I can clearly still hear but there was no impact from his fist hitting the man's face. I would blame adrenaline for not hearing it, but I'm too confused to be afraid. Then John is pulling me to him in a hug. A hug I don't want. He pulls back and says loudly, 'Are you ok?'

I nod because I want the hugging to stop but it doesn't and then in a horribly intimate gesture he cups the back of my head and kisses my cheek. I pull away. His eyes are angry when they meet mine and now I'm sure I'm still in some sort of dream. I dig my fingernails into my palms but I don't wake in my bed in Estes. Instead I'm growing colder by the minute. I don't get cold in dreams. I'm ushered into a fancy car and as I slide in I see John facing the cameras as if giving

a press conference and the man with the bloody nose walking off—nose wiped clean.

‘Well what the fuck?’ I whisper. I have a feeling this swearing thing is going to be the new normal.

‘What was that?’ the man next to me says.

‘Is this part of it?’ I say louder. Puzzle pieces click into place but the picture is still confusing. The man just laughs and then goes back to reading his papers. It looks like some sort of script with lines and everything. I try a couple more times to ask this guy questions but he just ignores me.

Chapter Thirteen

Trent

It's packed in here. There are only a few restaurants that can afford the costs of running a generator. The Denver Diner is the only good one within walking distance and 'good' is a loose term, not like what we get at the Four Seasons. I keep my baseball cap low. They've been rerunning footage of tonight's episode. I glance up.

I cringe at the expression on my dumb face when I realize she has escaped. At least it looks genuine. It was...but the critics don't know that. Maybe this little move will work in my favor and keep me hired for a while. For the first time, I get to see her escape. She works her hands free somehow. At least I can't be blamed for that; I didn't put the zip tie on. Then she slips out a hole in the wall. I watch as she breaks off the heels of her shoes and sprints away. She's fast, I can tell, but the shoes slow her down. I study the way she disarms me with little effort. It's a pretty basic move but she caught me off guard. They're not supposed to fight back.

The mainly male crowd around me groans in collective embarrassment. I can hear the snippets of conversations about how much better each one of them would have done sprinkled with just enough comments about putting her in her place. The guy next to me is talking about a couple of well-aimed kicks to show her who's boss. My semi-burger sticks in my throat. I know this kind of thing happens. When the Holts took power and put the rules in place to protect women,

all the violence just moved behind closed doors. It's better than it being on the streets I guess.

I feel it coming—the darkness from a very specific street creeping in—the night I can't live with and can never forget. The crowd laughs again. I have to get out of here. I throw an unidentified amount of money at the waitress and stumble out into the cold night air. I run the six blocks to my apartment. The air and the exercise help some, but the black memory of the men and her broken body doesn't quite make it into the locked box in the back of my head. By the time I make it to my apartment, the bright red blood is fading to grey but her eyes, frozen in horror, are looking at me. When I fired my weapon into the air it was too late. She was dead.

I'm cold. I wrap myself in all of the blankets and turn on the TV; anything to get her image out of my head.

Chapter Fourteen

Trent

I wake with my neck stiff and sore. I've fallen asleep on the couch; the muted TV flashes images and shoots light around the room. It takes me a minute to place myself. The cold wind leaking in through the old windows of my apartment pulls me back to reality. I need to get to work.

The hardwood floors creak with every step on my way to the kitchen. I check the fridge. One can of peaches and, because I left them in the can, it has gone all rusty. I let the door fall shut and peel off yesterday's shirt. I study my reflection in the small mirror above the sink. I look terrible, two days of dark hair growing on my face and my eyes look sad and tired—pathetic. I splash water on my face as if I can erase the past that seems plastered there. But in the end, I give up.

I scrub the fake blood out of my white t-shirt as I shower in the freezing water. I might be famous now, but I don't think I can call myself a celebrity yet. I can't imagine Hugo Redding had to wash his own shirts, as he showered, after the stunts he pulled. He probably had a double anyway but I bet even the double didn't have to wash out his own shirt. I have to get out of the shower before the shirt is clean or I'll die of hypothermia. My towel looks like the remains of my baby blanket that I dragged around in the dirt on the farm as I followed my dad everywhere. It picks up a few water droplets but I just air dry as I continue to scrub the shirt. I wring it out; there will always be a stain on it. I hang it over the yellowed claw-foot tub and side step out of the tiny bathroom.

My place isn't bad. At one point it would have been quite trendy. It's a one bedroom, plus it has a small bright alcove for an office. Almost one whole wall is a window. It looks out onto an alley with a giant brick wall of a 30 story building. Not much of a view, but the apartment's best feature is that I don't have to share it with anybody. In some of the city apartments, families are stacked five high, or living in old offices, but I have a job and my own tiny place. At least for now. I was sure I'd get fired when that girl got away. They said they didn't blame me, they just hadn't prepared for such an eventuality, but I'm going to have to be more careful.

I'm still cold as I pull on my only other t-shirt from the small wardrobe carved into the wall. It has two big drawers that stick whenever you try and open them but it reminds me of the picture of the wardrobe that led to Narnia. One of my favorite books when I was a kid, back when playing at war was fun. I shiver as I pull on my jacket. The only way I'll get warm today is if I run to work.

I take the worn stairs two at a time. The mutt my neighbor keeps for protection growls and barks at me as I pass his door. I stick to the edge of the previously green and gold carpet where the threads are still like carpet and less like the menacing ropes in the middle that threaten to trip and throw me down the stairs.

It's the foyer that reminds me that I don't live in real time anymore. In my apartment, I can almost pretend I'm a college student in my junior year struggling with finals and living off Ramen Noodles until I make it as a lawyer or a doctor or something else that would have made my dad proud. He was sure I'd be the first in our family to graduate from college. But in the hallway, the dust and garbage and caked mud from last winter reminds me that life ended. What we have left is

the exploded pieces of it that we're all carrying around for no reason, hoping that by chance we could throw them up in the air and it would all fall back together. I hurdle over one more bag of garbage and push out through the metal door. It's reinforced steel. A gift from Joe, the guy with the dog; as payment, the rest of the residents leave him alone. The cold air hits me: winter is coming. At least this year I won't be spending it entirely outside.

I run down the street. It's deserted. Growing up on a farm in middle-of-nowhere Wyoming meant that I learned to love solitude. Now, though, it means there will be no witnesses if I'm attacked on the way to work. Since Holt took power, things are better. But I can't shake off those first years when everyone was desperate and demanding their own survival at any cost. I was just a newbie in the National Guard trying to keep the peace but it was all out war. It seemed everyone was armed and felt entitled to whatever they needed or wanted.

The red images (today they're red, sometimes black, sometime a horrid putrid yellow) come pouring back in so I focus on the sound my boots make slapping the pavement and then listen for any noise that's out of place. I can see the first check-point ahead and pull my pass from inside my back pocket. It has my picture ID, the times I'm allowed out of my house and my occupation. But it's Wilson again and he just waves me through.

'Thanks,' I say as I keep running past him.

'Think you can hold on to her today?' he calls.

I turn but keep running backwards. 'Hey, I just do what they tell me.' And they told me that we're to behave like everything that happened last night was part of the script.

‘Yeah we’re all following orders.’ He laughs but, as it echoes off the buildings, it sounds empty.

The wind is whipping across the old Civic Center which sort of reminds me of Roman Parthenon ruins now. Nature has taken over again and just the few changes of seasons have started to crumble the once white columns of the outdoor amphitheater. My Dad brought me and my Mom down here for a weekend once. There was an outdoor symphony and we had a picnic and sat on blankets in the warm summer night. She’d left the big city to marry my Dad. She never complained and seemed happy out there on the farm but I remember the way she looked at him that night. He was all cocky like he had won an Olympic gold medal and I was only twelve so I couldn’t describe what the expression was in her eyes but I knew that I wanted someone to look at me like that one day. Of course every time they kissed I would groan and cover my eyes. The Capital building still looks OK but all the gold is gone from its dome. The Holts set up shop there for a while so it’s been maintained longer than the rest of the old buildings.

The next two checkpoints take more time. At the third one, on the old 16th Street Mall, I get a full pat down and my ID is triple checked and called in. Something is up. Not only do I see these guys everyday but after yesterday, I’m famous. I don’t say anything, though, and let them do their job. Discussing it’ll just make it worse. They finally let me through and I jog to the back entrance of the Four Seasons.

I push through the racks of clothes and people who seem to be running nowhere in particular. I grab a couple of doughnuts from the table and join the back of the crowd just as the director walks in. I made it. I take a bite of the chocolate cake one. It tastes like Sunday morning with my Dad when we would

play hooky from church. I don't know how long they can keep up the level of extravagance they rely on here but I'm going to enjoy it while it lasts.

'Cutting it a little close?' Patrick leans over, whispering to me.

'Checkpoints... you hear anything?'

He shakes his head. 'Took extra time on me too but I allowed for it.' He raises his eyebrows at me and I flip him off.

'Okay—so today we have the flat tire scenario.' The crowd of about twenty actors and extras quiet as the Director speaks. 'Everyone get their scripts last night?' It's a question but he doesn't even look up to see if we actually did. 'The only change is, Miss Alda will be on her own. We don't want her convincing four girls to run for it.' Everyone laughs. 'So let's get to it. Get your cameras. First shot in 20.'

I head over and get a tiny camera fitted on my shirt, by Marge, a woman whose brown and grey hair looks as tired as her face. It's all sticking out to the left as if she's standing in a strong wind.

'It's cold out today,' I try. She doesn't look at me, just violently pins the Colorado flag to my shirt and runs the wire to a pack which she slaps into my hand as if I'm being punished. But she has been here since probably four in the morning so I don't think it has anything to do with me. I grab a coat from wardrobe and head out to the car that finishes off my 'bad boy' persona: a Mustang, red of course.

On one of the monitors, I see the girls being given maps to their 'adventure with John' and four of them get into each car. I watch as Alda

contemplates the keys in her hand and that she will be driving alone. I can see the wariness on her face. But she slides in. I wonder what story they gave her to keep her from driving off. Not that it would matter. If she deviates from the map there are checkpoints everywhere. Although I would love to see her try—let someone else look like an idiot scrambling after her for a while. I see her pull away and I grab two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, one for now and one for the waiting.

Picturing my empty fridge at home, I chase the sandwich down with a slice of something pretending to be pizza. I don't think you can call something pizza if there's no cheese. Even if it is cut in a triangle. I pour hot coffee into a thermos and add some cream. After checking that no one is watching, I pour a bit more, hoping the fat will get me through to my next meal. Cream is a luxury and we're supposed to share it but I figure everyone back here will have at least two cups of coffee so I get all my cream now.

'Trent – you're up!'

I wave at the producer and make my way to the car. As I turn the key, the engine sounds like winning and I can't keep a smile from my lips as I drive off. I'm heading north where the city is the worst. And was the worst even before. But now that the world has really fallen apart, it's a war zone. The army should've cleared it from the homeless last night and the set should look like an abandoned warehouse district. But that doesn't mean the gangs that are still out here won't want some air time.

The buildings crumble progressively, the further I get from downtown. As if the whole city is crawling slowly off the edge of a steep cliff. The grass is growing up through the unattended streets and I have to navigate around downed

power lines and large tree branches that broke during the big blizzard last winter. The older buildings have fared even worse than the trees; roofs collapsed on already crumbling red brick walls exposing offices and pay-by-the-hour hotel rooms. They look frozen in time, like those pictures of London after WWII. A chair still angled slightly away from a desk as if its occupant just got up to check something in the other room.

I find my mark just under the I-70 Bridge outside the playground of a long abandoned elementary school. It's so decrepit it looks staged. The swing set with the one remaining swing, one side dangling on the ground, is so close to the highway. Just a chain link fence would have separated five year olds and speeding cars.

I settle into my seat and take a long sip of my creamy coffee. I nearly spit it out as Alda speeds past me, ten minutes early. But as she passes her mark, the tire pops on cue, a little bomb triggered by one of the stunt guys waiting out of sight with the hidden cameras. She pulls over. I check my watch. I'm supposed to leave her for ten minutes. In five, the scary homeless guy is supposed to bang on her window to scare her for a few minutes and then I come in and then John swoops in just as the audience realizes I'm not there to help her. I check my props: rope, cloth and a bottle with an exaggerated CHLOROFORM sticker on it. Like something from the 1950s movies my mom used to watch.

It's been one minute and she's already off script and out of the car. She digs in the trunk, producing a tire and the supplies to change it. I almost laugh at her expression. She looks perturbed, not anxious. To add ambiance to this comedy show, my ear piece is filled with swearing and confusion about why she's changing the tire. The director threatens to fire someone from props for leaving

the spare in the car. Alda kicks off her high heels and scrunches up the full skirt of her red dress, tucking the ends of it into her belt so that it hangs just above her knees and out of the way. She puts the jack in place and smiles when the car rises like it should. I see the homeless guy run past me and then limp as he gets into character. She looks up at his approach and I can't quite hear her but she grabs the tire iron and starts walking toward him. I can hear in my ear piece the chaos she's causing but the director is shouting for everyone to let it play for now.

I roll down my window in time to hear her say, 'Are you okay?'

This makes the guy stop in his tracks and my earpiece silent. She keeps a tight grip on her handy weapon but doesn't threaten him with it.

'Terry, you're going to have to try and grab her,' I hear in my ear piece. But Terry doesn't move. I know he's unarmed.

'What if she hits me?' he whispers.

And she says, 'What?'

'Just grab her! It's your job and it's not like there aren't a hundred other guys who could do it. Besides, she can't hit too hard I'm sure.'

'Do you need food?' Alda back-steps to her car but doesn't take her eyes off him. He rushes her and she brings the bar down hard on his outstretched arm, causing him to scream. Before he can react, she swings around connecting with his knee, causing him to fall.

'Shit! I think she broke his arm!' The earpiece again.

'She fucking did break my arm and my fucking knee!'

I watch, trying not to laugh as she kneels beside him.

‘I’m sorry, but you ran at me. I could’ve gone for your head you know,’ she says, reaching to inspect his arm but Terry rolls away.

‘Trent go!’ I hear and I drive up behind her car.

‘Ma’am, are you okay?’ I add in a hint of a southern drawl and get out. She eyes me with suspicion then looks back the way I came.

‘Where did you come from?’ She’s obviously putting together the fact that she only barely heard me drive up and with a car like this she should’ve heard it ten blocks before I arrived.

‘I was just checking out that school over there; seeing if it would be salvageable now that the city is growing with refugees.’ Always put a little truth in your lie; it makes it easier to swallow and she does. ‘Are you okay?’ I try again.

‘I’m fine, but this guy needs to get to a hospital. Do you think you can take him? It’d be faster and I’m on this show and I don’t think they’ll be too happy if I don’t get where I’m supposed to be.’

‘Well, it looks like you’re having a bit of car trouble. Why don’t I take you both?’

Her eyes narrow. ‘No, I’m fine,’ she says with a kind of precision reminiscent of my fifth grade English teacher Miss Paulson. ‘He needs help.’ She points at Terry and glares at me and I receive the message. She will not get into the car with me. She knows she shouldn’t trust me. I keep my expression neutral.

‘Okay, if you’re sure.’

There's yelling in my earpiece as I turn to Terry and then it quiets as I pretend to struggle to drag him to the car. Terry follows my lead, not helping at all.

She watches through squinty eyes for a minute and then looks at her watch and sighs, 'I'll take his legs.'

Terry screams for real this time and I see her flinch. I angle us so she has to open the door and slide his feet in first. Hopefully I can overpower her and force her in. I realize my mistake as she sees the props and drops Terry's legs. She runs. And runs. I shove Terry in with little compassion and chase after her but she has disappeared.

'A little help?' I say quietly.

'Umm, we lost her behind those buildings on your right. Cue John; maybe we can salvage this thing somehow.'

I take off. As I round the corner I slow, listening for any out-of-place noise. My feet crunch on the gravel and broken glass. I remember her bare feet and cringe. I squat down: sure enough there are bloody footprints. Something crashes and I take off again.

'She's back!' my earpiece screams.

'Back?' Back where?'

'Back at the car! Oh shit, she's gonna take the Mustang. Please tell me you did not leave the keys—'

‘Of course I left the damn keys! I was supposed to drive off with a hostage!’ I hear the car roar to life and I sprint.

‘Terry do something!’ the director says.

I hear the tires squeal and Terry grunting in my ear as I come around the corner. I see the Mustang screech to a stop up ahead. Terry screams in pain as she gets out of the car. She’s dragging Terry from the car as John pulls up. He runs over.

‘Are you alright?’ he says in that terrible Broadway voice as he joins her in pulling Terry from the car. His wounded leg bumps along like the end of a scarf. ‘You’re bleeding!’ John says, pointing at her feet. She looks surprised by the state of her feet. I run in and watch his right arm, waiting for the stunt punch. We’re a little off and he makes contact but it doesn’t hurt too much. I fall to the ground and pretend to be unconscious so I can’t see what is happening but my earpiece is all fired up as voices shout for him to carry her.

‘Allow me to assist you,’ he says with added drama.

‘Oh, I’m okay!’ she says and I have to keep myself from laughing. She doesn’t play this game very well but she’s clearly winning.

‘Oh for heaven’s sake, just offer her your arm then, Jeeze.’ The earpiece again.

I hear the arrival of the van and then ‘Okay Trent, Terry, you’re all clear. Trent the director wants to see you.’

I sigh. I wonder just how fired I'll be. Whether it will be just somewhat fired—demoted to crew—or a lot fired where I'll have to scrape a living out of cleaning up the rubble like the rest of the city.

Chapter Fifteen

Megan

I become aware of the pieces of my body as if the pain is a laser, pointing out where to find them. My ribs hurt where it feels like they are being squeezed and my head pounds out a rhythm of pain as if I'm bouncing. As I open one eye, I can see the sky and the tops of buildings moving. I am floating. I'm not dead because death shouldn't hurt this much. I'm cold and I can feel that my chest is exposed so I raise my arm to cover myself but my hand hits what feels like a person. I am being carried. For a moment, I think it might be Finn.

I turn my head to see his face. I'm instantly nauseous, not only from the movement but because it's not Finn, it's John. I'm the girl in the movie that I hate. I am the girl—the one being carried—rescued. I am the girl who didn't fight hard enough.

I wasn't her this morning. This morning I was tough and smart and strong. They don't match. I made a paper doll chain once but the scissors weren't sharp enough. The folded pieces slipped so the last doll was deformed. That's me. I was the same until now. The scissors slipped and now I am the girl whose body I can't trust.

I hear someone say it's four thirty. I was supposed to hit the mark on my map at ten past four. Twenty minutes for me to go from the girl I was this morning to the girl I don't recognize.

Before

I'm teetering on the highest red heels I've ever seen—I wouldn't even call them heels. They feel like twigs that, with every step, might snap. My black skirt is shorter than I've ever worn. It looks like one of those wide headbands they used to wear in the 60s. I keep tugging at my horrid hot-pink shirt to get it to skim my lowest ribs. I'm in the meeting room with the other girls who look similarly dipped in fabric as if they just wanted us to test the possibility of wearing clothes.

'Well ladies, today is a free day!' It's Don Juniper. 'Well, not totally free...'
He laughs that strange laugh as if everyone is in on the joke, only none of us are.
'We want you to get out of here today and explore the city! Our crew is handing out maps of designated routes you can take to get a look at some of the recovery effort to make Denver great again.'

I can't quite see how I'm supposed to go for a stroll when every movement I make sends my skirt creeping higher.

Now

There's faint cheering which doesn't make any sense and I'm laid down on something—a stretcher, I think, because it's soft—but not like a bed—and so narrow that it feels like any movement will send me off the edge. It hurts too much to turn my head. I cringe as John's face comes into view and his hand strokes my cheek and then leans in to kiss my forehead. I force my head deeper into the pillow to try to get away but his lips leave a searing mark on my skin. And my bare chest feels more exposed. I am moving again. I feel each bump of the wheels until I am loaded into what seems like an ambulance. Finally a sheet is thrown over me. It doesn't offer warmth but I clutch at the privacy it offers. I

want to stay awake; I want to be back in control of my own body. But my body is not mine right now. I am the girl whose body is not hers.

Before

A map is shoved into my hands; I 'get' to go on a loop past the performing arts building and then to Market Street before coming back to the Hotel. There are stops marked out. The girls spill out into the cool air. Everyone's heels are so high; I'm not the only one struggling to walk today. We fan off in various directions. I'm even more suspicious of the clothes now because I'm instantly freezing. The heels are ridiculous. I decide a cut foot is going to heal faster than a broken ankle. I take them off and carry them.

The sun is out so I take advantage of where it peeks through the tall buildings on the left side of the street and use its heat in place of a coat. My first stop is the dancing sculptures outside the Performing Arts Center. I make my way through the connected buildings. The giant glass roof still soars above me but most of the glass is gone so the metal supports just look like the ribs of a dinosaur carcass. The bronze statues of the man and the woman dressed as Shakespearian thespians are caked with layers of the changing seasons, blurring their features as if they are melting chocolate. Much of the glass entryway is broken. I guess by looters but I'm not sure what they would've found in here except costumes. There wouldn't have been much food. The picture of an angry mob tearing through boxes of opera masks makes me smile. It shouldn't I know, but I can't help it. I'm the girl who laughs when she shouldn't.

The wind hits me as I find the steps to the park with the white dancers. They were impressive when I was young. But walking up to them now, their

three-story height seems higher. One of them has lost part of its leg that was extended in arabesque. It lies on the ground in three pieces. So now they look less like a pair dancing and more like they are frozen in the middle of a crime. The supportive partner's featureless face somehow looks sinister. The grass is dead and rough against my feet. I wonder if I'm being watched... probably.

Now

The room is dark and a woman's face is just above me.

'We don't have much time. Can you walk?'

I study her face, not sure this is real. I remember the anesthesia from the surgery I had on my shoulder. I don't feel like that. In fact I'm pretty sure I've been given no pain medication at all because I can feel each bruise like a fingerprint of that fucker's knuckles.

'Can you move?' she tries again. There's something desperate in her face that makes me try to sit up. I can, if I wrap my arm around my middle. It feels like my stomach and ribs are trying to expand out of my body and holding them in allows me to move. I am the girl who needs to be reminded that her body belongs to her, so I hold on tight.

The woman is older—in her thirties I'd say but small and looks like she could compete with me in a sprint. She keeps looking over her shoulder. It's then that I realize I'm in what looks like a hospital room. But it's like it has been cut out of a hospital and placed in a warehouse. There are three walls but the fourth wall is gone. I can see cameras pointing in various directions but they are off. They look as if they suddenly decided to sleep. She puts a gentle hand under my arm and helps me stand. The cold white ground is shiny and, as I step slowly

forward, it ends on a dusty warehouse floor. It's a stage—I'm in a staged hospital. I stop. I am the girl who is on display.

Before

I make my way down 14th Street. There are sounds of construction. According to my map, I'm supposed to stop in front of the building where they are working. It looks staged, with no actual work going on. Now I know I'm being watched. I see the same guy carrying the same piece of wood back and forth. He just walks about fifty feet turns and comes back. And there's a table-saw running but no one is using it. I sigh and keep moving to Market Street.

My Mom brought me here to a coffee shop once. She said she'd come here as a teenager. She laughed at how cool they thought they were—sipping coffee that was drowning in chocolate, pretending to be grownups. It was a good day. I find its shell halfway down the street. I pick my way through the debris and find the store stripped bare. It was a little deli, I remember, so every scrap of food from the shelves has disappeared. The table where we sat is still in the corner, one of the white wooden chairs pushed back like someone just got up. It's not as amusing when the memories have faces.

This place makes me feel robbed. I can imagine I would have taken Finn—or I guess not Finn because I probably would never have met him—but some guy; we would've sat at that table. I would have said something to make him laugh and he would have held my hand as we left. I wasn't supposed to stop here. But no matter who's in charge, I just can't seem to follow the rules.

Now

'Who are you?' I demand, yanking my arm back.

‘Shhh,’ she looks around with an urgency that snaps my mouth shut.

She leans in and speaks very softly in my ear.

‘I’m Anna. I am a member of a resistance here in the city and I need to show you something.’

‘Are you going to get me out of here?’ I am the girl who wants to be rescued.

She rushes me to a side door, waves to a guy with a stethoscope around his neck organizing something on a trolley, and we step out into a freezing night.

‘I can get you out of here,’ she says, looking right into my eyes. ‘But I’m hoping after what I show you, you’ll stay and help us.’ She waits and I study the sincerity of her face again.

‘If this is some sort of scene...’ I am the girl who wants to be rescued.

‘It’s not. I promise.’

Before

I make my way back to 14th. I am still her. The girl from before. I know what to do. I hear someone following me so I cross the street. Then there are three more—all men. I change direction. Keep calm. Look for an exit. The banks and offices are just segments of larger buildings. No gaps except the occasional broken window leading into a dead end. Now there are six men. I am trapped.

Now

I’m in an electric van driving so slow it’s silent. Gripping the bench I’m sitting on. I try to keep Anna’s face in view but it keeps blurring into images of

before. Watching what is taken from me in that twenty minutes. As the pieces of me are removed and rearranged so that now I am that girl. The girl who gets into vans with strangers.

Before

I am still her.

At first, they just taunt me—saying I’m asking for this because of how I’m dressed—I must be up for anything. They keep circling, but not coming very close. Then, one at a time, each guy comes a little closer, touches me—strokes my hair or slides a hand down my arm—and then steps away. They ask me where my man is. I am still the girl from before, the one who doesn’t need a man, who calculates, who stays calm and watches the next man approach. I swing around, stabbing his arm with my shoe. He screams out in pain and I follow it up with a kick to his groin. They stop moving. I lift up my hands, heels of the shoes pointing out. They are looking at each other for clues. No one knows the next thing. It’s just a story.

Now

‘How much do you know about how the city is being run?’

‘Nothing, really...’ I am the girl who talks to strangers—answers their questions.

‘You know how bad it was before though, right?’

I nod. I am the girl changed by violence.

‘Since then the “rules” have been put in place.’

‘I saw those on TV.’

‘Well you didn’t see what the rules actually mean.’ The van rolls to a stop. We are silent. There’s shouting outside. Anna bangs open the back doors. Two people dive in.

I am the girl who flinches at loud noises.

I can’t see who they are but it looks like a guy and a girl. The girl is shaking and the guy is making shushing noises and rubbing her back.

‘Where’s Julie?’ Anna asks. But there is a sigh in her voice like she already knows the answer.

‘Dead,’ the girl whispers. Anna nods. ‘Let’s go.’ She bangs on the back of the driver’s seat and we take off at a speed that makes me expect squealing tires—but there are none.

We’re heading north. Well, it feels like we’re heading north.

‘Okay Meredith,’ Anna says. ‘I know you’re tired but I need to know if anything has changed in there.’

‘Umm,’ her voice is timid and shaking, which irritates me and I shift in my seat to try to get the grating feeling off me. As if my skin is being replaced. I am the girl who can’t look at vulnerability. Her vulnerability is pressing in on me like a mirror maze—my own new pathetic image blocking me at every turn. ‘It’s just violence or... umm reward. Like if you don’t do what they say they just straight up beat you or... umm they take stuff, like your blankets, or even your bed.’ She turns her face towards the window; her hoodie doesn’t cover her face and a bit of red hair pokes out.

I recognize her—she was in the competition with me. I am the girl who doesn't care about others.

Before

I'm pissed. As I drop my hands just a little, one of them nods to another. He steps in heavily and tries to swing a giant gorilla fist at my face. But he's big and slow so I easily dodge it. When I come up, I drop the shoe and use the heel of my hand to connect with his nose—there's a satisfying crunch and blood pours out. I am the girl who uses her enemies' weakness to her own advantage.

I feel arms grab me from both sides and I kick as hard as I can but their grip only gets stronger. The guy whose nose I broke says, 'hold her still!' He steps toward me and dodges my kicks. He lands a punch—my head whips back and I can't see.

'Not her face!' I hear off to the side. Before I regain my vision, I feel the blows to my body. I am the girl who keeps fighting.

Now

'Do they want to get out?' Anna asks Meredith.

'Some do...but then they remind you constantly there's nowhere to go if you escape. If you get out, you're on your own. And if you do what they say, you get the stuff back or even better: you get some version of status. They just see which works for each girl; sometimes...' she swallows 'beating them with an extension cord works; sometimes threatening to...umm hurt someone they love works; sometimes it's the little rewards like extra food or a better room. Just...' She tightens her arms around both knees as if to check they are still there. 'Until

you can't even see yourself as human anymore.' She tries to continue but can't force any more words out.

Anna reaches across and puts a hand on Meredith's knee. 'How was it Leighla?' She turns to the guy with Meredith.

'It's bad. Checks are getting more intense. You need your pass but they require a special pass to get access to the house. I talked my way out of it but I almost didn't make it in.' The voice is high like a woman's and I see now she's a woman dressed as a man. 'It'll be worse now that we got Meredith out. They'll be on to anyone without the right connections.'

'We're here,' the driver says. As we get out of the car, I can hear water and I think we must be somewhere along the Platte river. I am the girl who doesn't pay attention to where strangers are taking her. I am the girl who doesn't enjoy the silhouette of trees against the night sky.

Before

I can't see but I can feel pieces of me slipping away. My strength. My skill. I can't fight. I can't even stand. There's shouting, and some laughing. I feel cold as my shirt is ripped but I can't quite connect with the humiliation. It's as if I know later that this will be awful but I can't make my brain wake up enough to care.

I am the girl who wants to survive.

Somewhere in the distance I hear someone yelling, 'cut!' and I am falling to the ground, my hands and knees scraping the pavement. But I still feel kicks—

hard in my side, making my elbows buckle. There's one last one but it sends me flying. My head smacks the pavement and I am out.

I am the girl who loses consciousness.

Now

'Okay Meredith, this is where we say goodbye.'

'I don't think you should stay.' I can see the shimmer of tears as they slide down Meredith's cheek. 'Get your people out. It's not going to change. No one else really wants out anyway. Maybe we can try to leave the city and just start a new life. Just get the rest of the resistance out...'

Anna gives her a small smile and pulls her in for a hug. 'Don't worry, we've got a plan. You did so well! We're all really proud of you.'

'I'm sorry about Julie. I really tried.'

Anna nods. 'It's not your fault.'

Meredith and Leighla run off and, minutes later, only Leighla comes back.

As we get back in the car, Leighla peels off her moustache with a wince and sheds several layers of clothes that made her look bigger—she's quite small.

'What's going on?' I croak out.

Anna explains. 'We're a group of women who stayed in the city to try to avoid the path the new world is barreling down. Despite what you have been led to believe, the city isn't what it seems, women are...' She sighs. 'And it's not just women—it's like when the war started, fear brought people's worst sides out.'

I am the girl who believes the worst about people.

‘You can’t exchange freedom for safety.’ She sighs again and pinches the bridge of her nose as if she can force a complex problem to come out clearly. ‘Look, before the war, things could have gone either way. Women were gaining some equality because the world was an equal playing field. I mean, in some ways...You know, we didn’t have to kill our food and you didn’t need physical strength to watch the stock market or be a CEO. But with the plague, women were weak again.’

I am the girl who is weak.

‘And men fear weakness. Hell, everyone fears weakness. But men can show their strength through actual force. Holt has capitalized on this and made a world where men must compete for status and, in that process, women have become objects—property. The more women they ‘help’, the more status or better jobs they get. The women bought into it because submitting yourself to slavery is better than being raped and murdered on the street.’

I am the girl who flinches at words.

‘So women have exchanged their freedom for the illusion of safety. It’s just all that happens to them is behind a solid locked door. Meredith has been working with us since the beginning. Men can pay to have an exclusive...let’s call it an *interview* with the pretty girls from the show. When girls are not chosen by John, they’re sent to live in that house.’

She lets me sit with this for a moment and I’m grateful because my body has gone cold and stiff as if I was just shut in a refrigerator. But the pause isn’t long enough. I am the girl who needs time to recover.

‘You’ve seen the rule that women are not allowed out alone?’

I nod.

‘Well, this is absolute. If they are caught out alone, they go to these houses as well. So they’re forced to live with any man that will have them—sometimes two and three women to one man. Some are okay—things aren’t so bad—almost normal. Some are even with their husbands from before. But for many, the men share them around like power tools or treat them as slaves.’

‘Why do they stay? Why don’t they come out and live with us?’ I am the girl who wants to go home.

‘They think it’s worse. All of their information is controlled. Plus we have no way of getting them to you. And even if we could they don’t trust us, especially if they’re happy enough where they are. Even if they’re in a bad place, they think it’s worse out there. And to be honest what we have to offer them is worse in some ways. If they do come to us, they are living in gang occupied sections of the city in horrible conditions.’

I am the girl with nothing to say.

Anna looks desperate now. ‘I know you need more time, but we’re out of it. I need you to trust me and I need you to help me and I don’t have time to prove I’m worthy of either. You’re in a unique position. You can get closer to the leadership than any of our people have in the past. They’re keeping you in because you are bringing in the ratings. But I’m afraid if you keep playing the game the way you have been, they’ll find a way to get you out. They can’t have women remembering that they can take care of themselves.’

‘What are you asking?’ I am the girl who can’t take care of herself.

‘We have two objectives. Number two is to get the girls out who want out.’

I nod. ‘What’s number one?’

‘New leadership.’ Anna looks right into my eyes until I understand exactly what she means.

‘You want me to kill Holt?’

‘Do you think you can?’

‘I absolutely can, if I have a gun.’ I am the girl who will go for the kill shot. ‘But if the problem is as big as you say it is, killing Holt will do nothing but make the city unstable again.’

‘Let us worry about that. You’re the only one who can get close to Holt.’

‘I can get close to his son, but I’ve never even met Isaac.’

‘But you will, and soon, we’re sure.’

‘So, I’m just supposed to carry a gun in the skin-tight shrinking dresses in which they’re putting me in case, at some point, I get a meeting with this guy?’ I am the girl who finds excuses.

‘There’s a small network on the inside. If you agree to this, we’ll get you the weapon when you need it.’

I stare at her as the scene falls into place in my head. She's not only asking me to be an assassin. I've seen the security for not just the Holts, but the people next in command.

'So if I'm successful, you're asking me to die.'

'Sacrifices must be made for the good of the whole.'

'The whole what?'

'Times up I'm afraid. If you're gone any longer, covers will be blown. The doctor in charge of your care is on our side. If you decide to help us, all you have to do is wear this on your right wrist and give the camera a wave at some point. We'll be watching,' Anna hands me a silver beaded bracelet with a tiny dangling peace-sign pendant.

I used to be the girl who found irony amusing.

Chapter Sixteen

Megan

I push through the door to the stage hospital and I'm greeted by the doctor I saw earlier. He grips my arm and pulls me forward. I yank my arm back; the pain is shooting through my shoulder wound.

He cringes, 'Sorry.' It's not anger I see on his face but a calculating fear. 'They're coming back to do a live shot of me telling John what's wrong with you. You need to look a lot worse off than you are.' He cringes an apologetic look at me. 'I mean I know you're feeling...' he lets the words trail off. I don't blame him; there doesn't seem to be words for how I feel right now. 'But I need you to be nearly dead, and, since we have no time, I'm putting my life and the lives of many others in your ability to look asleep. Can you do it?'

I nod. I seem to be agreeing to things on automatic. As if I am not quite human anymore—just a robot. The question pushes a button and my brain responds with a preprogrammed yes.

'I can drug you but I'd rather not; you've had a serious head injury. Plus, I'm not sure if they want you to wake up or not. So I'd rather say you're drugged than actually drug you.'

'I can do it.' I wince as I slide into bed. He tapes a tube to my arm with skin colored tape hiding the lie. I know it's a fake because I have a vivid memory of the digging required to connect me to the last bag of liquid I required. I cringe because this memory conjures Finn and I can't think about Finn right now. Then

he tucks the sheet around me, tight like a burrito but my arms are free. ‘What’s your name?’

‘We’ll talk later if we get a chance. Right now I need you to focus. Just pretend to be asleep. If they want you to wake up, you’ll have to put on a very good show. I’m going to pretend to put some meds into this IV and I’ll squeeze your hand. Then I need you to slowly wake up. But—’ he jumps as a door bangs open and voices in mid-conversation become clear.

‘Night, night,’ he whispers, but his eyes are still full of fear. He seems like a terrible actor. I think I can, at least, do better than him. It helps that I’m exhausted. Though I grow increasingly panicked about what he was going to say after the ‘but’.

‘How’s she doing?’ It sounds like our director.

‘She’s okay; resting now.’

‘Can she wake up?’

‘Do you want her to?’

‘I’m not sure; it depends on whether John wants to talk to her when he gets here. Can you wake her up if you need to?’

‘Yes. She’s sedated but I can give her some Narcan to wake her up.’

‘Good, we’ll see. Okay, let’s get this shot. Make sure you get a close up of her hand and her face.’ When he says this, I become aware of a throbbing in my right hand and I want to look at it. When I woke up, everything hurt. I didn’t bother to take stock. ‘Caleb, see if we need a filter on that to make her color look

worse. John will be here in ten and I just need you to tell him that she's not doing well.'

'But—' it's the doctor again.

'I know. She'll have a miraculous recovery if these ratings do well and we'll get her back in the game. If they decide to axe her, this is the easiest way. We're going to have to get both shots. So if you have to wake her, we'll already have the she-nearly-died-shots.'

I'm focusing on keeping my body relaxed and my breathing even; but I jump when someone touches my arm. I feel a squeeze on my hand letting me know it's the doctor. It seems like he's saying one of two things: either I can trust him or I need to get myself under control. But I may not be able to do either. The room feels colder and I feel the buzzing of the voices around me, I wonder if they are all wearing microphones.

After the director shouts action, someone, I assume the doctor, fiddles with several different metallic sounding things around me, checks my pulse and, at one point, lifts my eyelids and shines a light in my eyes. In instinct, my eyelids try to squeeze shut. But they don't do it twice so I guess I look normal enough.

'Okay, John's here. Let's get set up for this, people.'

I can hear a group approaching from the direction of the door. They sound like they're all talking at once.

'John, good to see you. If you come over here, we'll get started. Has your father decided which direction to take her story?'

'No, he said get footage for both scenarios.'

‘Great; we already anticipated that.’

‘How is she?’ John asks, but the words don’t have the weight of someone who cares. More like someone wondering who’s winning a football game. As if he’s come in at half-time and asks as a courtesy to the avid fans.

‘If you don’t mind, John, I think we’ll get a better reaction if he tells you for the first time on camera.’

‘I doubt it,’ he sounds bored.

‘Well, if I’m wrong, we’ll do it again. Okay?’

The room grows silent. I feel the tension from the power struggle increase from the other side of the little stage, as if it’s rising over me like fog. It creeps up and over the end of my bed and settles on my skin, causing the hairs on my arm to stand up. Then the director says, ‘Or I can tell you first, either way.’ There’s a long pause then, ‘We have your mark over here. This is umm—’ he stumbles looking for a name—‘er, the doctor in charge of her care.’ The noise in the room returns, pulling the tension away again.

‘Let’s get on with this.’ His tone has changed. It’s charged somehow, as if he has stolen some power. I hate that I recognize his voice.

‘Right. Okay. Here’s your mark here and doctor, yes, that’s your mark, good.’ There’s a pause, some shuffling and people whispering. ‘We ready?’

‘All set,’ someone shouts.

‘Quiet on the set... and Action.’

I lie still as they repeat the process a few times: the doctor talking about my grave condition and how I'm lucky to be alive. I have to hold onto the sheets to stop from shuddering as John's voice changes; the concern is thick like too much syrup on sweet pancakes. They spend some time discussing how inappropriately I was dressed—as if I had chosen the clothes myself. Then I have to actually bite into my tongue to keep from jumping out of bed when they agree it would've been better if I'd just not fought back. How it made the men angrier.

'Can I sit with her awhile?' It's John's sugary voice again.

'Of course, I'll give you a minute.'

I feel my body tense as the footsteps come closer and I tell every muscle to be still. I hear something scrape against the floor and I think John sits beside me. My hand is hot—already rejecting his touch. But I beg each cell in my body to remain still and I think I manage when he takes my hand in both of his.

I hear sniffing. He cannot be crying. I want to sit up and spit in his face. My heart rate increases. I'm lucky the beeping monitors are just for show.

'And, cut! That's great everyone. John—really great work there. Okay, doctor, are you set to wake her up?'

'Yep, sure thing.' The doctor, I think, starts fiddling with stuff from the tray beside my bed.

'I'm thinking maybe, John...if you want...you could kiss her awake.' Someone drops something big—I think the doctor because it's right beside me—and I jump and then hold as still as I can, barely remembering to breathe.

‘Umm, she’ll be pretty out of it—I don’t think that will work—she might be combative.’ It’s the doctor and, even though he’s not selling the line, I begin planning how to repay him. An elaborate ceremony of some sort. I always hated Sleeping Beauty. It never made sense. Why the hell would she fall in love right when she woke up? It was years. She would have at least been confused for a while. Trying to catch up on current events? No. Just a kiss and then a wedding. Stupid.

‘Ah combative?’ The director again. It sounds like he believes it—I guess his experience with my previous ‘combateness’ is enough to give weight to what the doctor said.

‘Yes any number of reactions are possible.’

‘John?’ The director defers to him and I realize I’m squeezing the sheet so tight in my fist I am losing feeling in my fingertips. I focus on my breathing and on releasing the muscles in my hand one knuckle at a time.

‘I’m not the expert,’ John says through a yawn.

‘It’s not worth the risk.’ The doctor jumps in and I breathe out. ‘I’m all set. You ready for me to wake her up?’

‘Yep.’

I hear some clicking noises and then those sounds are swallowed in the chattering about lighting and camera angles. Then I feel a squeeze on my hand. I take a deep breath but don’t open my eyes. I turn my head as if I’ll go back to sleep again. The room grows quiet and I feel my cheeks go red as I realize I’m being watched. I hope that’s a real side effect of the fake meds.

‘Megan?’

‘Hmmm?’ I mumble, still not opening my eyes.

‘Can you open your eyes for me?’

I squeeze them shut and then open them just a sliver. Then I close one and open the other one.

‘Good. I’m just going to shine a light in your eyes now, okay?’

This time I don’t need to act; the light flashing in and out burns, after my eyes have been closed for so long and I flinch away.

‘Okay, she’s all set,’ the doctor says, giving my hand one more squeeze before backing away.

The next face I see is the director. ‘Why’s her face so red?’

‘Uh...umm, that’s just from the Narcan.’ It’s the doctor. He’s terrible at this. Maybe they’ll just think he’s a bad doctor.

‘Caleb can we do anything about this? She’s too red. Megan. Can you hear me?’ He shouts and I cringe but nod. ‘Okay, good. Megan, we’re shooting a scene here. We just want you to talk to John for a bit. Won’t that be nice?’ He’s still talking to me like I’m a deaf old lady, but I give him a tired nod anyway. ‘Just say whatever you want to him.’

A list of things I would like to say to him starts to compile in my head. It involves more swearing than I’ve ever done in my life. But I file that away for later; right now, I imagine the show and what Anne told me before. They’re going to want me to be grateful and seem helpless. I don’t think I can do this. I’m going

to have to play up the drowsiness. A young guy with thick blond hair in a precise wavy design, leans over me, brushes makeup all over my face, then hurries off. I guess that's Caleb.

'Okay John, we're all set for you.'

I watch him return and sit casually at my side. He doesn't look at me but performs an absent study of the back of his hands. He's handsome but in a way that irritates me. Like a picture with too much red. You can't see any of the other colors. His eyes find mine and hold them for just long enough before I flutter my eyelids closed to cover a shudder. It's not the indifference I'm expecting. Nor is it the anger that I tell myself I should've been expecting. It's a look that is layered. It has elements that I recognize—there's amusement and some curiosity but there's that same horrible blackness from the first time I met him seeping into the blue like octopus ink in the ocean.

'Okay... quiet on the set.'

John sits up straight, takes my hand and contorts his face into one of deep concern. It makes me sick.

'Megan, you're awake!' His words slide out smooth and quick, reminding me of the flick of a snake's tongue.

'John?' I try to make my voice croak. And flutter my eyes again but I can't look at him so I pretend as though I'm taking in the room.

'Yes, my dear. I'm here. How are you feeling?'

'Tired.' I make it seem as though my eyelids are pulling closed despite my best efforts.

‘I’m sure you are. It was such an ordeal. Why did you fight them?’

I have to sift through all of my initial responses to this so I don’t say them out loud. I tell myself I’m saving them for the right moment—the moment I can back them up with a bullet. I focus on what the show wants to achieve.

‘You saved me,’ I slur.

‘Yes. Sadly, I couldn’t save everyone. I wish I could save you all—but these are the rules.’

I have to practice the words I need to use next. I repeat them in my head a couple times and then force it out. ‘Thank you.’ It’s a whisper but I hope it just sounds like I’m tired.

‘Well, I hope I made the right decision. There are other girls not so prone to putting themselves in harm’s way. I was forced to abandon two of them because of your irresponsible behavior.’ He says ‘irresponsible’ like an aristocrat. I feel the substance of the word like a rock. I want to grab it and shove back down his throat. I think of the doctor; his fate is tangled with not only my next words but my ability to control myself.

‘I’ll try to be better.’ I draw out the last word and relax my whole body, letting my head fall to the side. Now I’ll have to trust in the doctor’s acting skills.

‘Megan?’

‘Cut,’ the director shouts. ‘Doctor? Is she supposed to fall back asleep?’

I hear someone running from the other side of the warehouse. John drops my hand.

‘Ummm yes, yes the Narcan is only temporary sometimes—especially with a head injury.’

John sighs, ‘You’ve got what you need?’ He asks like it’s a question but he has already stood and I can hear him walking away.

‘Yes, that should be fine,’ the director shouts after him. ‘Let’s pack up everyone.’ His voice sounds like he is trying to shove positivity into it which is forcing it higher.

Finally, there’s a slow procession of people leaving and the room is quiet. ‘Okay Megan, all clear,’ the doctor says and I sit up too fast. My head spins and my body complains—every bruise yelling.

‘Whoa, careful there. You may not be as bad as I made it sound but you’re still injured.’

I glare at him. ‘You made it sound like it was my fault!’

He cringes, which helps decrease the rage a little.

‘Sorry. It’s my job and I have to keep it if I want to stay here and help.’

I let that sink in and study him. People should wear signs in this new world—ones that say enemy or friend. I search his face and then his eyes as if I can see the tiny words printed somewhere on him.

‘I’m Peter,’ he says, holding out a hand. He looks to be in his thirties. Brown hair and tall with serious brown eyes and just enough stubble on his face to give him a look of handsome mystery but tired—like someone who would’ve played a doctor on a TV show. I guess in the new world we are all pretending.

‘I’m Megan,’ I say, deciding I don’t really have a choice about trusting him. I add to this that he saved me from the kiss. Friend. But I double check all the cameras are asleep again. ‘How’d I do?’

‘You did great. I wouldn’t nominate you for any awards or anything, but we pulled it off. You hungry?’

I nod. ‘But I think my stomach would reject any food right now. Everything hurts. Plus I get a little nauseous when my brain and my mouth have to disagree.’

He laughs at that. ‘You should eat something. But just take it easy.’ He hands me a protein bar and I take a small bite from the end. He pulls up a chair.

‘So, what’s actually wrong with me?’ I get a good look at my hand: it is several shades of purple.

He takes a bite of his own protein bar. ‘A concussion and lots more like that,’ he says pointing at my bruised hand.

‘Yep, that’s about what it feels like.’ I set my protein bar on the bed beside me. ‘I wasn’t conscious the whole time. I don’t know what...all they did.’

‘I saw the show. They had John come and rescue you just after you lost consciousness.’

‘Why did it take so long?’

He looks down at his hands. ‘From what I understand, they were sending you and everyone watching a message.’

‘Girls can’t take care of themselves.’

He nods. I take a deep breath; it feels like my body was rearranged into someone else. Like a clay figure that can be squished and pulled into whatever shape the hands decide. There's a blackness to my attitude that I can't seem to find my way through. Changing the subject used to work, so I try that: 'So, what's your story?'

'What?'

'I mean, I know what they want me to do, but what've they got you doing?'

'Oh, the resistance?' He looks at me for confirmation and I nod. 'I volunteered. My wife and I stayed as long as we could. She was part of the group that first established the underground to get women out. But then she got pregnant.' His mouth looks serious but his eyes go all bright like they have captured a bit of the sun. He pulls out a wallet and works at it, peeling back a layer of the worn brown leather and brings out a folded piece of paper. He unfolds it with surgical precision and hands it to me.

It's hard to see, printed on very thin, cheap paper and with black ink. Printing is very rare nowadays. But I can see a beautiful woman with long dark hair. Her smile is small like she has too much joy in her heart but it is only peeking through a horrible reality. She holds next to her cheek, a chubby newborn with a bow that is dangling on what seems like a crazy amount of hair. The baby looks unhappy about whatever is going on at the time. As if deciding whether she needs to cry, but not quite sure it's worth the effort.

'This is Georgiana,' he says, pointing to his wife. 'And Lola.'

‘They’re beautiful.’ I try to make it sound genuine but, like how I felt about Meredith, it seems I’ve used up all of my empathy on myself. All I can see is what those men did to me—no one else matters. I hate this more than the pain from the violence. I force myself to admire the picture for a little longer.

He smiles and takes the picture back, studies it for a moment and then carefully puts it back into the compartment in his wallet. ‘She told me I had to stay.’

I smile at him. ‘I thought you said you volunteered.’

He gives me a crooked smile. ‘Yes well, I’ve been *volunteering* for all sorts of things since the day I met her. But we’ve been involved since the beginning. When she told me to stay, it was the first time I wasn’t sure I could do what she asked. They got out a month before Lola was born. I still haven’t met her.’

I sit with that for a moment. The sacrifice for the greater good. I still can’t see what an assassination will do to improve the situation—except bring more chaos. Like those old stories where cutting the head off the snake confuses the enemy and leads to your victory but in this case the confusion would just lead to more death. From what I can tell, Isaac Holt is the pin in the grenade.

‘So what’s your job—besides being an actor and a doctor?’

‘We probably shouldn’t know too much about what each other does—in case one of us is compromised.’ His lips cringe around the word.

So they haven’t told him they’ve asked me to be an assassin. ‘How long have I got in here?’

‘Another day or two at the most.’ He stands. ‘You should get some rest.’ He starts to walk away but turns back. ‘If they decide you’re out of the show, I’ll get you out of here.’

I nod, not sure what else to say. As he goes, I consider the decision in front of me. Chaos or not, the fact that Holt not only allowed the beating but ordered it, makes thoughts of killing him very easy. I lie back down and the exhaustion puts on hold any decisions about my future.

Chapter Seventeen

Trent

I'm pacing in the staff room. I was helping with the construction scene for Sarah—we were just wrapping up. And then, in my ear piece, there were shouts about what was happening with Alda. I raced the couple of blocks to see if I could help and she was...I close my eyes. Her limp body was not responding to the kicks anymore. I could smell the blood from where I was standing. The sound of each boot connecting with her soft body—it's a sound that doesn't occur anywhere else in nature. Only humans can manufacture it. The pictures of my other nightmare have been on a loop since—they are yellow today.

The show must go on. Yesterday was the zombie show. I just had to stumble around on camera for an hour but I can't keep this up. They kept Alda on the show. They did a segment with her in the hospital. She didn't look good. I think if I see she's okay maybe the memories will go away. I step out of the staff room and have to grip the edges of my sweatshirt to keep steady as people bustle around me.

I nearly run to her when I see her arrive. The relief cuts off my brain temporarily but I manage to stop myself before she sees me. She's walking carefully but there's something else that has changed about her. She doesn't look like she's tumbling anymore—chasing after the plot—she looks like everything she sees and hears is expected. It does help to see her but not as much as I hoped. It separates her out of the yellowed images at least; and pushes them a little further out so that I can see where I am. I get into the van with the other support

staff. We're going to Idaho Springs to help manage the girls as John rescues them and shuttle the losers off to wherever they go.

The ride up there's a blur. We have to go the long way South to avoid the rebels who will be patrolling the direct route. They maintain the wedge out West and North of the city so we drive south before heading west. A half hour drive becomes almost an hour. It seems like a waste but the more it looks like we have a presence in the mountains, the safer everyone in the city feels.

I keep my head against the cold glass; it helps get the images of her broken body from morphing all of my surroundings into the night when everything changed for me. I watch as the weather packs in just as they planned. The stranded hiker show. But I can't imagine how most of these girls will pull off looking like actual hikers. We get the call that they have been dropped off as we pile out of the van and get to work setting up for the dinner scene. It's in a famous old restaurant that used to sell pizza. My stomach growls. I never got to eat there but the legend made it all the way to Wyoming—the layers of meat and cheese all topped off by a crust that was as big as a dinner roll. People used to drizzle it with honey. Dinner and dessert all in one slice. I focus on the memory of my friends planning a trip there before everything fell apart and the nightmares finally pause.

Chapter Eighteen

Megan

I step into the van careful not to disturb my ribs that feel like they are stacked in a precarious formation, rather than secured together by tendons as they should be. I slide onto the front bench next to—I think her name is Tammy or something. I can't be sure though. The tension in the van is high as they slam the door shut. We all freeze as the rustling of our jackets offends the silence, like the sudden void of a quiet movie scene after an action sequence. You hold the half-eaten popcorn in suspension in your mouth until the next gun goes off.

There's something different about the mood in the van—far different from the kidnap scene. The girls seem normal, less like damsels in distress, but tense—we must be off camera. They must've known all along and they were pretending for the show—unlike me. The driver slides into the seat and we take off.

'I'm Megan,' I say holding out my hand to the girl next to me. She doesn't acknowledge except her eyes flick to the rear-view mirror where I see the set of eyes, not watching the road but, looking directly at us. The driver's eyes go back to the road and our hushed journey continues. I guess eventually the tension is too much for the dude driving because he flicks on the CD player and some version of a 90s rock band plays.

'I'm Victoria,' I hear softly in my ear. I turn toward her but she's still staring out the front window or more likely watching the rear-view mirror. 'But

people call me Tori.’ I keep my eyes forward as well but he keeps bobbing to the music.

‘I’m Rebecca,’ we hear between us but from behind. I whip around but Tori stares straight forward and, when I turn around, I can’t tell which girl said anything because both are looking out of their opposite windows.

‘Where are you from?’ I say now, looking forward, feeling like I just caught on to the code to enter the ‘cool kid’ group but a little too late.

‘I’m from Minnesota,’ Rebecca says and I hear the little exaggerated ‘Oh’ sound roll off her tongue.

‘I’m from here in Denver,’ Tori says.

‘I’m Sarah. I’m from Arizona,’ Sarah says on my other side. I feel her shift in her seat as if that makes her uncomfortable but it’s probably just the memory of home. I’m getting the hang of this now—not swinging wildly with childish excitement every time someone joins the discussion.

‘I’m Paige and you guys better watch yourselves; we aren’t supposed to get along.’ I feel each girl retreat a little as the tension increases again. ‘But I’m fuckin’ sick of the rules,’ she finishes.

On our journey up, through stunted conversation, I learn that Tori’s dad is still alive and that Christy moved here with her family but they were killed in a mugging when things went south.

Rebecca is on her own. And Sarah has a sister who was married off to a guy with two wives already because their Uncle insisted. The conversation is

handed out like small slices of pizza—it is never enough and leaves me feeling hungry.

Then we pull up next to Echo Lake. This is bad. The snow is coming down in heavy globs as if the snowflakes have already decided to form snowballs. The snow hasn't melted from the last storm—the first storm of the season when I was home. I close my eyes to push home and Finn as far away from my thoughts as I can. The five of us step out of the van and join the others.

‘Ok, umm you guys are supposed to go on a walk around the lake and show the viewers the beautiful countryside we have here.’ It’s the driver but he’s no Don Juniper. Tori and I lock eyes—this is not hiking weather. ‘Here’s a walkie in case you need anything; otherwise someone will be back in an hour to pick you up.’ Tori reaches out and takes it. Then he just gets in the van and drives off.

It feels like we’re alone. I head towards Tori. I guess my face holds the questions and the conversation I want to have because she gives a firm shake of her head.

‘Well let’s give the viewers a taste of the Rockies shall we?’ She puts weight on the word viewers and tilts her head. I follow her line of sight till I see the cameras. The four of us who rode up together gravitate toward each other.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ Tori says. Her eyes still share my knowledge of a Rocky Mountain Blizzard but her voice is—I can’t describe it—perfect—like a nineteen fifties TV commercial. Feminine and sweet.

‘It is!’ I say trying to follow her lead but my performance comes off like a soap opera actor to her Dame Judi. She’s tall—even without the heels they usually make us wear. Her hair is pulled into a high ponytail that hangs in jet black

perfect tiny ringlets. Her eyes are too fierce to be called chocolate—the color is right but there's too much depth to compare them to something so superficial. Her skin too could be milk chocolate but there's a regalness to her that ruins that description as well. We pass the old gift shop; only two walls are still standing. It looks like it was burned out. Probably lightning. That's what many of the fires are now with no one to put them out. It as if the human element disintegrated under the power of the nature around it. The lake is black with no exposed blue sky to reflect—making it look like tar. The thick snow does nothing to disturb the surface completing the effect of thick-and-sticky instead of water. The rest of the mountain towers above us. The branches are catching the snowflakes now so they look like they have been dusted with powdered sugar. But I can't enjoy it—I tell myself it's because I know this storm is nothing to mess with but it's a numbness that seems to be surrounding me like my body is covered in a dense heavy blanket. I can't see clear enough to care.

Girls try small talk behind us. I turn to look and yelp as I trip causing every bruise to feel like I'm being punched again. It's Rebecca who steadies me. It takes a minute for me to find my breath and, as I look up, I see Tori and Paige have formed a sort of barrier between me and the nearest camera pointing out a formation of four pinecones dangling from the tree. Sarah seems like she has just learned how to tie shoes and is taking forever to tie a perfect bow, right in front of me. They're protecting me. So the people don't see me in pain. This washes over me and I can almost see it coming it has so many layers. Sarah waits till I meet her eyes and give her a slight nod. Tori checks that I look normal again and we set off. They care about me. Which means they care less about this stupid show. Which means they haven't bought into it. Which means they might be part of the

solution. I have to press my lips together to keep from blurting everything out. Each camera we pass on the route, forces me to shove the truth further down.

We make it around the lake giggling and pointing things out but by the time we return to the drop off the storm is a *storm* and there's no van. The walkie crackles in Tori's hand.

'Ladies, we have some bad news we can't get back to you. I'm afraid the storm is just too bad—w-n-the- ne-' the voice cuts in and out and then nothing. I see some panic spread and that's when I notice how young some of these girls are; when they aren't all done up they look like they are barely sixteen. Tori looks at, Sarah, Paige, Rebecca and then me.

'What are we going to do?' Sarah makes her voice sound squeaky but her face conveys the real question. Tori looks at me. Right, I'm the one who doesn't get this game. I can be the one who says things out loud.

'We need to find shelter.'

'Shouldn't we wait for rescue?' Tori asks. 'Surely someone will find us.' She's so good at this.

'Look, either way, the storm is coming in fast. You stay here. I'll go and try to find shelter just in case they're not coming back.'

'I think we should wait,' Tori says in a slightly whiny voice but her eyes confirm—even if we are in the show, this storm isn't a prop. She gives a nod toward the girls who, in the white snow, look more like babies now. I nod. They'll stay and look after them.

‘Ok, if I’m not back in an hour, take shelter in what’s left of the gift shop. It should at least block some of the wind.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Rebecca says. This stumps me—she should come. I shouldn’t go alone. But the throbbing pain in my side reminds me of the risk she’s taking. I run a finger along my jaw taking off some of the makeup so she will see the bruise there.

‘You stay here and make sure these girls stay safe,’ I say choking a little over the propaganda. Her lips form a tight line; she knows I’m right but she wants to help. ‘I know what I’m doing.’ This is true so it comes out with more confidence. I was trained to survive in a storm. I know exactly what to do. Rule one—don’t go alone—but after that, I know what to do. She nods. And I take off.

As I leave them, the space gives me time to process what just happened. None of these girls are what I expected after that first night where we were all trussed up for the introduction. Why are they being so nice to me? How did they all end up with me in the van? Then it hits me. The way they were looking after me—they saw my beating and they wanted to get to know me. They chose my van not the other way around. Convincing these girls to get out might be easier than I thought. Getting them out, on the other, hand is another thing entirely.

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