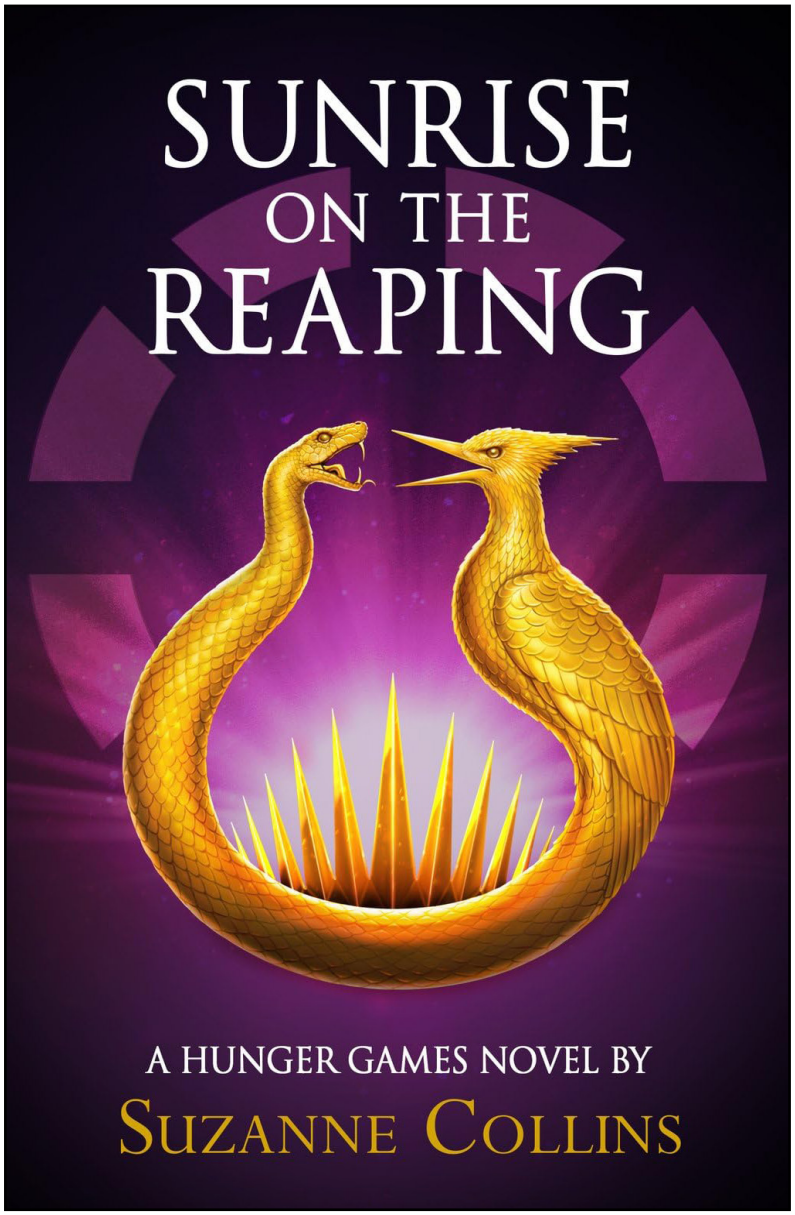


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"Happy birthday, Haymitch!"

The upside of being born on reaping day is that you can sleep late on your birthday. It's pretty much downhill from there. A day off school hardly compensates for the terror of the name drawing. Even if you survive that, nobody feels like having cake after watching two kids being hauled off to the Capitol for slaughter. I roll over and pull the sheet over my head.

"Happy birthday!" My ten-year-old brother, Sid, gives my shoulder a shake. "You said be your rooster. You said you wanted to get to the woods at daylight."

It's true. I'm hoping to finish my work before the ceremony so I can devote the afternoon to the two things I love best — wasting time and being with my girl, Lenore Dove. My ma makes indulging in either of these a challenge, since she regularly announces that no job is too hard or dirty or tricky for me, and even the poorest people can scrape up a few pennies to dump their misery on somebody else. But given the dual occasions of the day, I think she'll allow for a bit of freedom as long as my work is done. It's the Gamemakers who might ruin my plans.

"Haymitch!" wails Sid. "The sun's coming up!"

"All right, all right. I'm up, too." I roll straight off the mattress onto the floor and pull on a pair of shorts made from a government-issued flour sack. The words COURTESY OF THE CAPITOL end up stamped across my butt. My ma wastes nothing. Widowed young when my pa died in a coal mine fire, she's raised Sid and me by

taking in laundry and making every bit of anything count. The hardwood ashes in the fire pit are saved for lye soap. Eggshells get ground up to fertilize the garden. Someday these shorts will be torn into strips and woven into a rug.

I finish dressing and toss Sid back in his bed, where he burrows right down in the patchwork quilt. In the kitchen, I grab a piece of corn bread, an upgrade for my birthday instead of the gritty, dark stuff made from the Capitol flour. Out back, my ma's already stirring a steaming kettle of clothes with a stick, her muscles straining as she flips a pair of miner's overalls. She's only thirty-five, but life's sorrows have already cut lines into her face, like they do.

Ma catches sight of me in the doorway and wipes her brow. "Happy sixteenth. Sauce on the stove."

"Thanks, Ma." I find a saucepan of stewed plums and scoop some on my bread before I head out. I found these in the woods the other day, but it's a nice surprise to have them all hot and sugared.

"Need you to fill the cistern today," Ma says as I pass.

We've got cold running water, only it comes out in a thin stream that would take an age to fill a bucket. There's a special barrel of pure rainwater she charges extra for because the clothes come out softer, but she uses our well water for most of the laundry. What with pumping and hauling, filling the cistern's a two-hour job even with Sid's help.

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" I ask.

"I'm running low and I've got a mountain of wash to do," she answers.

"This afternoon, then," I say, trying to hide my frustration. If the reaping's done by one, and assuming we're not part of this year's sacrifice, I can finish the water by three and still see Lenore Dove.

A blanket of mist wraps protectively around the worn, gray houses of the Seam. It would be soothing if it wasn't for the scattered cries of children being chased in their dreams. In the last few weeks, as the Fiftieth Hunger Games has drawn closer, these sounds have become more frequent, much like the anxious thoughts I work hard to keep at bay. *The second Quarter Quell. Twice as many kids.* No point in worrying, I tell myself, there's nothing you can do about it. *Like two Hunger Games in one.* No way to control the outcome of the reaping or what follows it. So don't feed the nightmares. Don't let yourself panic. Don't give the Capitol that. They've taken enough already.

I follow the empty cinder street to the hill with the miners' graveyard. A jumble of rough markers spikes the slope. Everything from headstones with carved names and dates to wooden boards with peeling paint. My pa's buried in the family plot. A patch of Abernathys, with one limestone marker doing for us all.

After a quick check for witnesses — no one's here much, and certainly not at dawn — I crawl under the fence into the woods outside District 12 and begin the trek to the still. Brewing white liquor with Hattie Meeney is dicey business, but it's a picnic compared to killing rats or cleaning outhouses. She expects me to work hard, but she works hard herself, and even though she'll never see sixty again, she can do more than a person half her age. There's a lot of grunt work involved. Collecting firewood, hauling grain, taking in the full bottles and toting back the empties to be refilled. That's where I come in. I'm Hattie's mule.

I stop at what we call the depot, a bare patch of ground concealed by the drooping boughs of a willow tree, where Hattie drops off supplies. Two twenty-five-pound sacks of cracked corn await, and I swing one over each shoulder.

It takes about half an hour to reach the still, where I find Hattie tending a pot of mash next to the remains of a small fire.

She offers me her long-handled wooden spoon. "Why don't you give this a stir?"

I drop the bags of corn under a lean-to where we keep supplies and raise the spoon in victory. "Whoa, a promotion!"

Me being allowed to handle the mash is something new. Maybe Hattie's starting to train me to be a partner one day. Two of us brewing full-time would increase output, and there's always more demand than she can meet, even for the eye-watering stuff she makes with the Capitol grain. Particularly for that, since it's cheap enough for the miners to afford. The good stuff gets bought up by disorderly soldiers — Peacekeepers, that is — and the richer folk in town. But bootlegging's illegal ten different ways, and all it would take is a new Head Peacekeeper — one who didn't like a stiff drink himself — to land us in the stocks or worse. Mining's tough work, but they don't hang you for it.

While Hattie packs pint bottles of white liquor into a basket lined with moss, I squat down and stir the mash on and off. When it's cooled some, I pour it into a deep bucket and she adds the yeast. I set the mash in the lean-to so it can ferment. She's not distilling today since she doesn't want to risk the smoke attracting attention if the mist burns off. Our local Peacekeepers may turn a blind eye to Hattie's still and her stall in the Hob, an old warehouse that serves as our black market, but she's worried their Capitol counterparts in their low-flying, cloaked hovercraft will spot us from the air. No hauling in the bottles today either, so I'm tasked with chopping wood for the week. When the pile's replenished, I ask what else needs doing, and she just shakes her head.

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