

take back the woods. I nudge Pollux with my elbow and point out a small black bird with a crown. It hops to a new branch, momentarily opening its wings, showing off its white patches. Pollux gestures to my pin and raises his eyebrows questioningly. I nod, confirming it's a mockingjay. I hold up one finger to say *Wait, I'll show you*, and whistle a birdcall. The mockingjay cocks its head and whistles the call right back at me. Then, to my surprise, Pollux whistles a few notes of his own. The bird answers him immediately. Pollux's face breaks into an expression of delight and he has a series of melodic exchanges with the mockingjay. My guess is it's the first conversation he's had in years. Music draws mockingjays like blossoms do bees, and in a short while he's got half a dozen of them perched in the branches over our heads. He taps me on the arm and uses a twig to write a word in the dirt. *SING?*

Usually, I'd decline, but it's kind of impossible to say no to Pollux, given the circumstances. Besides, the mockingjays' song voices are different from their whistles, and I'd like him to hear them. So, before I actually think about what I'm doing, I sing Rue's four notes, the ones she used to signal the end of the workday in 11. The notes that ended up as the background music to her murder. The birds don't know that. They pick up the simple phrase and bounce it back and forth between them in sweet harmony. Just as they did in the Hunger Games before the mutations broke through the trees, chased us onto the Cornucopia, and slowly gnawed Caro to a bloody pulp—

"Want to hear them do a real song?" I burst out. Anything to stop those memories. I'm on my feet, moving back into the trees, resting my hand on the rough trunk of a maple where the birds perch. I have not sung "The Hanging Tree" out loud for ten years, because it's forbidden, but I remember every word. I begin softly, sweetly, as my father did.

"Are you, are you

Coming to the tree

Where they strung up a man they say murdered three.

Strange things did happen here

No stranger would it be

If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree."

The mockingjays begin to alter their songs as they become aware of my new offering.

"Are you, are you

Coming to the tree

Where the dead man called out for his love to flee.

Strange things did happen here

No stranger would it be

If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree."

I have the birds' attention now. In one more verse, surely they will have captured the melody, as it's simple and repeats four times with little variation.

*"Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Where I told you to run, so we'd both be free.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree."*

A hush in the trees. Just the rustle of leaves in the breeze. But no birds, mockingjay or other. Pecta's right. They do fall silent when I sing. Just as they did for my father.

*"Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Wear a necklace of rope, side by side with me.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree."*

The birds are waiting for me to continue. But that's it. Last verse. In the stillness I remember the scene. I was home from a day in the woods with my father. Sitting on the floor with Prim, who was just a toddler, singing "The Hanging Tree." Making us necklaces out of scraps of old rope like it said in the song, not knowing the real meaning of the words. The tune was simple and easy to harmonize to, though, and back then I could memorize almost anything set to music after a round or two. Suddenly, my mother snatched the rope necklaces away and was yelling at my father. I started to cry because my mother never yelled, and

124

then Prim was wailing and I ran outside to hide. As I had exactly one hiding spot—in the Meadow under a honeysuckle bush—my father found me immediately. He calmed me down and told me everything was fine, only we'd better not sing that song anymore. My mother just wanted me to forget it. So, of course, every word was immediately, irrevocably branded into my brain.

We didn't sing it anymore, my father and I, or even speak of it. After he died, it used to come back to me a lot. Being older, I began to understand the lyrics. At the beginning, it sounds like a guy is trying to get his girlfriend to secretly meet up with him at midnight. But it's an odd place for a tryst, a hanging tree, where a man was hung for murder. The murderer's lover must have had something to do with the killing, or maybe they were just going to punish her anyway, because his corpse called out for her to flee. That's weird obviously, the talking-corpse bit, but it's not until the third verse that "The Hanging Tree" begins to get unnerving. You realize the singer of the song is the dead murderer. He's still in the hanging tree. And even though he told his lover to flee, he keeps asking if she's coming to meet him. The phrase *Where I told you to run, so we'd both be free* is the most troubling because at first you think he's talking about when he told her to flee, presumably to safety. But then you wonder if he meant for her to run to him. To death. In the final stanza, it's clear that that's what he's waiting for. His lover, with her rope necklace, hanging dead next to him in the tree.

125