### Always - A Peeta Mellark Love Story

by KariRogers

**Summary**

Imagine a world torn apart by hunger, greed, torture, and happiness. In the country once known as the United States of America, the Capitol of Panem has a tight grip on each of the twelve districts surrounding it. In District Twelve, it's Reaping Day for the 74th Hunger Games; a Capitol creation to keep the districts in the tightest grip of all - fear. Instead of Primrose Everdeen's name being called however, Gale Hawthorne's younger sister, Cordelia is chosen to go to the Capitol and kill 23 other children, including her crush, Peeta Mellark.

**Notes**

I own nothing apart from Cordelia Hawthorne.
Chapter 1

I woke up to hear screaming in the distance - and I knew exactly who it was. Primrose Everdeen. I slowly sat up, rubbing my eyes, running my fingers through my thick, wavy, dark hair. It was halfway down my back now, and mum had taught me how to do so many things with it. I tied it back in a ponytail, then wrapped it in a bun, then made my way into the kitchen for breakfast, taking care not to wake my little sister, Posy, who I shared a room with.

"Argh," I cried, then tried to muffle it before Posy woke up, along with my two little brothers, Vick and Rory. I looked up at the figure who had walked straight into me, to find him grinning. 

"Morning," he whispered. Gale, my older brother. I resisted the urge to punch him in the arm, and spoke to him instead.

"You off to the woods?" I asked. He nodded.

"Yeah, gonna see Katniss. We don't have to be in the square until just before two, so I'm guessing she will be making the most of it." He threw a light jacket on and put his boots on, then stepped out of the door, taking care to close it quietly. Our part of District 12, named the Seam, was usually so full of miners at this time of the morning - men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, and a layer of grime and coal dust under their fingernails. But today, it was eerily silent out there; as it was every year on reaping day. As Gale said, we didn't have to be in the town square until two o'clock this afternoon, and as it was mandatory attendance, unless you were at death's door, everyone took the chance to lie in. If you could sleep that is.

I pulled out our last loaf of bread from the cupboard and sliced it up. It was a couple of days old now, but it still tasted amazing. Gale would get fresh bread in exchange for squirrels that he and Katniss would hunt down. She was an amazing hunter, she would get them right in the eye, every single time. I had been out with them quite a few times, and Gale had taught me how to set snares. I wasn't great, but I was good enough, bringing down a few wild birds by myself. I didn't like to venture out into the woods too often. It was forbidden, but it had nothing to do with that. I knew how my brother felt about Katniss, even if he wouldn't admit it, and I knew that the woods was their place to go to, their sanctuary. I got some goats cheese out aswell, and spread some of that on the slices of bread, then quietly went to wake up my brothers and sister, taking care not to wake mum up. She had been working till very late last night, so needed her sleep. We sat and ate breakfast at the table, a little quieter than we normally would have done. Even Posy who was five knew that reaping day wasn't a day to be mucking around on.

An hour later, Gale came back home, with some more goats cheese, made from Primrose's goats milk, a large pouch of strawberries, four fish and three squirrels. He put them on the freshly cleaned table, causing me to sigh and glare at him. It was hard to stay mad at that face though - he just grinned. He always looked happy after he had been to see Katniss.

"I'll trade these if you want," I offered. "We need some more bread, and I doubt the Mayor would turn away some of these strawberries." Gale just gave me that look, that look which said he knew what I was thinking. I hated that look. It was the same one I gave him when he said he was off to see Katniss.

"Go on then," he said, sitting down. "I need to get cleaned up anyway. Don't forget we need some more cloth, though." I nodded and ran out. The old rickety houses in the Seam looked like they were being held together by just the coal dust. This was the poorest part of District 12, but we still liked to try and keep it looking as tidy as we could. The game bag at my side banged against my leg, though I took care not to crush the strawberries. I knocked on the back door - in case the peacekeepers saw me - of Mayor Undersee's house, and his daughter Madge answered the door, looking very pretty in her crisp white dress.

"Ooh, father loves these," she smiled, her face lighting up at the sight of the fruit. We might have gotten a better deal at the Hob for them, but the Mayor always paid a good price, and was about to afford it.

I made my way to the bakery, where I knew I would get a good deal for the squirrels. The baker
loved them, he was always amazed at how perfectly Katniss was able to shoot them. As he opened the door to the back of the bakery, the smell of freshly baked bread wafted out, and I just stood there for a moment or two, taking in the wonderful aroma. "I've got some fresh squirrels for you," I smiled, opening my game bag. His face broke into a large grin. "How many do you have today?" he asked. "Three." 

"Hang on then," he said, going back into the kitchen of the bakery. As I waited for him to come back, I heard a smack coming from somewhere in the building. Like someone getting hit. The baker's wife, Mrs Mellark was an evil old cow, always hitting her three sons. I wondered who was at the end of her wrath this time. Mr Mellark came back looking dejected and fed up - I assume he was also hit by her, so was unable to stand up to her for his sons - with five loaves of steaming hot bread in his hands, wrapped in a cloth.

"I wouldn't normally give you this much, but as it's reaping day, we have to look out for each other, don't we?" he said, trying to smile. He looked as though he was going to say something, but changed his mind. As I turned to go, he called out to me.

"Good luck, Cora." I thanked him and made my way to the Hob, District 12's black market, to trade the fish for some cloth, then I went home.

My real name is Cordelia Hawthorne, but everyone calls me Cora. I'm fifteen - sixteen next week - and I'm in the same year at school as Katniss Everdeen. My favourite subject at school is math, although the main subject at school is learning about how our country, Panem, was built out of the ashes from a country once known as North America. About how the dark days came about when some of the people rebelled. That was when the Hunger Games came about, it was the Capitol's way of keeping the Districts in check. They would send two children, aged between 12 and 18, one boy and one girl, from each District, to the Capitol, to fight in an arena to the death. Twenty four go in, but only one comes out. Today was the day we would be chosen, the seventy fourth year of the Hunger Games. It was awful, but the Capitol didn't care. To most of the residents there, it was just a tv show.

By quarter to two, I had scrubbed, washed, and dressed in my Sunday best, and was walking into the town square with Gale, Katniss and Prim. It was Prim's first year, and she looked absolutely terrified. Her name was only in once though. Gale's was in forty two times this year. I lined up so I could register, and they could take a drop of my blood to sign me in, then I stood with Katniss on the right hand side, where the rest of the girls were. The cameras were up already, filming us live direct to the Capitol. I looked to the other side, where the boys were and saw Gale. I mouthed 'good luck' to him, but neither of us were smiling. I was really worried about him being chosen, he was the one who held our family together.

At two o'clock exactly, the doors to the Hall of Justice opened in front of us, and out came Mayor Undersee, Haymitch Abernathy (District 12's only living victor, making him the mentor), and Effie trinket, the Capitol escort for our District. She looked completely out of place, with her neon pink hair, her dark pink dress, her white painted face, and her lips, with the lipstick making her lips look pursed. She played a video first, on the big screen they had set up, where President Snow was droning on about Panem, and all the things we learn at school every day. Once that was over, Effie, who seemed to be mouthing the words to herself, looked up and smiled at us all.

"Happy Hunger Games," she said, "and may the odds be ever in your favor. Now, as ever, ladies first." She tottered over to the large glass ball in front of the girls. She seemed to savor the moment, picking out a piece of paper. When she had finally chosen one, she tottered back to the middle of the stage, opened it and held it aloft, reading the name. "Cordelia Hawthorne."

No that can't be right, I thought. I looked around me, as people were moving out of my way. Katniss looked slightly relieved, but I figured it was because Prim hadn't been chosen and I completely understood. As I made my way towards the peacekeepers and up to the front, I caught Gale's eye and he was in shock.
"Lovely," said Effie, as I stepped up on to the stage, and to the centre, with her. "And now, for the boys," she said, I assume at an attempt to be dramatic, but I wasn't really taking much in. I was still in shock. I barely registered that she had come back to the centre with a second piece of paper, which she once again, unfolded and held aloft.

"Peeta Mellark."

The baker's son. I knew him. We had classes together at school. I watched as he stepped up, almost in tears, to the centre of the stage. Effie told us to shake hands, which we did, then she turned to the crowd, asking them to give us a round of applause. To their credit, not one of them did. They did, however, kiss three fingers on their left hand and raised them into the air. It was a sign of respect in District 12. Unsure of what to do next, as she clearly wasn't expecting this, she quickly ushered us in the Justice Building, where we were put into separate rooms, ready for our families to come and say goodbye.
The room in the Justice Building that the peacekeepers put me in was the most luxurious room I had ever been in. We had been in this building before, five years ago when dad was killed in the mine explosion, the same one which killed Katniss and Primrose's dad. I sat on the long sofa, which was draped in a soft silken throw, and covered in cushions. The view from the second floor window, where I was sat, was nothing like I had ever seen before. The square was laid out in front of me, with the butcher's shop just across from the Justice Building; the baker's shop, where I traded those squirrels for bread this morning; the sweet shop that no-one in the Seam can really afford to go to, but we still like to look in the window, or walk past and smell the glorious, sugary aroma coming from inside. I smoothed down the nonexistent creases in my green skirt, then jumped as the door opened. In walked mum, Posy, Vick, Rory, and Gale, and I just burst into tears. I didn't mean to, I'm not a crying type of person, but I figured in the circumstances, no-one would mind. Gale was crying, himself, and just threw his arms around me as I sobbed into his shoulder for a few minutes.
"You can do this," he said, as I stood up straight. My younger siblings clamped onto my lower legs. "You can hunt."
"Only animals, and not as well as you and Katniss," I tried to protest, but he held up a hand to stop me.
"But when the time comes to it, it's virtually the same." I nodded and he stepped back, to let mum come and hug me. She held me tight, I haven't felt her hug me like this since before dad died. Before long, our time was up, and a peacekeeper was at the door, telling them to come away. My next visitors were Katniss and Primrose. She may not have been as close to me as she was my brother, but we had classes together at school, she had spent quite a bit of time with me, patiently teaching me to hunt. I was extremely grateful to her for that. Primrose pressed a round, golden pin into my hand. I looked down at it, and saw a bird.
"For luck," she whispered. "As long as you have this, nothing bad will happen to you."
"Thankyou," I whispered back.
My final visitor was a complete surprise. Mr Mellark, the baker. Why is he here? I would have thought he would want to be with Peeta, his son.
"Hi," he said, rather awkwardly.
"Do you want to sit down?" I asked, just as awkwardly. He nodded, and took the seat opposite me.
"Cora, I know I shouldn't be here, but you have always been good to us, always brought us... well, things we like," he said, very carefully, in case there were peacekeepers listening in. "I wanted you to know that we won't forget about your family while you are in the arena."
"Thankyou," I whispered, tears forming in my eyes again.
"I also wanted to give you this," he said, handing me a paper bag. He grunted and then left the room. I peeked into the bag and gasped. He had brought me a large slice of my favourite cake - strawberry and chocolate, with the most beautiful decoration on top. Normally this detail of decoration would have been saved for the large cakes, but here it was, sat on my little cake. Soon it was time to leave for the Capitol. I joined Peeta in the car with Effie and Haymitch, and we set off for the train station. It wasn't a long journey, but it felt like forever. I glanced over at Peeta and saw his eyes were red and puffy. I felt bad for him, but then realised we were both heading for the same same fate.

It was the first day back after the summer holidays, and we were in our first class of the day. The teacher had us stand in a crowd at the back of the classroom, while she sorted us on to our seating plan for the year. It was boy/girl, boy/girl, boy/girl, and I was just hoping that I wouldn't get put next to Malin. He was one of the merchant kids, and one of the biggest bullies I had ever come across. I'm pretty sure there was a streak of pure evil in that boy. His parents ran the shoe shop in town, and while they were friendly, he was the complete opposite. Thankfully he was never in
whenever we went to get our shoes, so it was peaceful of a sort, but he still made everyone lives hell at school. Especially if you came from the Seam. I was in a world of my own when my name was called out.

"Cordelia Hawthorne," Mrs Greenwood called out, impatiently. I snapped my head up as Katniss jabbed my arm, and the rest of the class started laughing.

"Sorry Ma'am," I smiled, apologetically.

"You are to sit with Peeta Mellark." I made my way over to the table where he was sat and made myself comfortable. He had gone red a little and he didn't seem to want to look at me. I guess he was just embarrassed at having to sit with a girl from the Seam.

A week or so later, we were given an assignment - to work in our pairs to give a presentation about Panem. We had a week to prepare, which meant working together as much as possible. Over that week, Peeta and I worked closer than Gale and Katniss when they go out to hunt. When he wasn't looking, I would notice little things about him. The way he sticks his tongue out in the corner of his mouth when he is concentrating, the crinkle in his nose when he smiles, the way his eyes light up when he is laughing, the way his blonde fringe flops down into his blue eyes. After the assignment was completed, I would always find excuses to go to the bakery. To trade squirrels for bread, to sometimes buy myself a piece of my favourite strawberry and chocolate cake, topped with swirls. Or I would go with mum when she wanted something, and I would find myself watching Peeta in the back of the bakery, lifting those heavy sacks of flour as if they were bags of feathers, or kneading the dough so it was as light as air. Every time I saw him, I would get a warm stirring feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I would automatically smile a little. You know when you meet someone so beautiful and then you actually talk to them and five minutes later, they're as dull as a brick? Then there's other people, when you meet them you think 'Not bad. They're okay.' And then you get to know them and their face just sort of becomes them. Like their personality's written all over it. A they just turn into something so beautiful. That's Peeta.

I lied earlier. The room in the Justice Building wasn't the most luxurious room I had ever been in, the Capitol train was. It was exquisite. The silk sofas, the mahogany tables, the cakes, the sweets, all the colours of the rainbow. And more. I took a seat one one of the little sofas, and Peeta joined me, his eyes still red and puffy from crying earlier. Effie sat with us for a moment, telling us that even though we were only here for a short while, the Capitol had done everything they could to make our time with them as comfortable as possible.

"I'll go and find Haymitch," she decided. "He's probably in the bar car." She sighed as she went off to look for our mentor. I looked out of the window and was surprised to see we were moving. Neither of us had felt a thing.

"Did they come to say goodbye?" I asked him. He lowered his head and sighed.

"Yeah, but they only stayed for a few moments. Mum dragged my dad and brothers out once they had said a few words." He squeezed his hand and he looked up into my eyes. I swear a little smile flashed across his mouth.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Your dad came to see me though." This was news to Peeta by the look of it. "Sounds about right," he said. "Ok we're in this now, no moping about." That was what I liked about him, he just got on and did whatever was needed. I nodded. I was about to answer when the door slid open, and in walked Haymitch. I say walked, it was more of a stagger. He went straight over to the different coloured bottles of liqueur and poured himself out some bright amber liquid. He opened the lid of a metal pot, but seemed annoyed at it's contents.

"Where's the ice?" he asked the two of us. We shrugged our shoulders and shook our heads, causing him to slam the lid back on it. "No ice," he muttered to himself, walking away. Effie came back as Haymitch left the other door, and told us she was taking us to our rooms. We each had a bedroom, with a dressing area and a bathroom with hot and cold running water. Back at home, in the Seam, we never had hot running water. We had to boil it on the stove if we wanted anything other than cold water. I put Primrose's pin down on the table next to the bed - I had a closer look and realised it was a mockingjay - and peeled off my green dress. Stepping into the shower was amazing. I stood under the hot, flowing water for a few moments, just forgetting about where I was, about what was to be expected of me over the next few weeks. When I climbed out, I
wrapped the biggest, fluffiest towel around myself (and a smaller one for my hair), then walked
over to the wardrobe, where I found all manners of clothing, and shoes. I dressed in a soft, cotton
blue blouse and a pair of black trousers, the leg of each were probably as wide as my torso, but
they felt comfortable. I slipped a pair of flat pumps on, dried my hair, plaits it round the side,
and made my way back to the dining car.

Peeta was already there, dressed in a plain, light green, cotton shirt and a pair of brown trousers.
His lit up as I walked into the room, and sat down next to him. Effie sat opposite me. She
indicated to the train attendants that we were ready to eat, and enough food to feed my family for a
month was placed in front of us, covering the table. I had a small bowl of carrot soup, then some
pork chops and mashed potatoes with some salad, then some fruit and cheese, and then we
finished it all off with a large, gooey, chocolate cake. I had planned on starting small, but I tried to
eat as much as I could. I had never had food so good before, and I figured it was probably going
to be a good idea if I put on a few pounds between now and the Games.

"Well at least you two have manners," Effie said, crinkling her nose up. "The two we had last
year were like savages, eating with their hands, piling as much food as they could into their
mouths. It really upset my digestion." The tributes last year were from the Seam, they lived only
four houses down from mine. Growing up there usually meant that there was very little food to go
around, so when you had a large amount like this put in front of you, you grab as much as you
can, before it all goes. I was lucky enough that my mother taught us table manners. Peeta, being
from the Merchant area, would have no doubt been taught table manners from an early age. This
really grated on me, so I made a point of shovelling food in with my hands, then wiping my hands
on the table cloth. Effie pursed her lips, Peeta grinned at me.

Afterwards, we go into another compartment to watch the highlights of today's reapings across
Panem. Unless you live in the Capitol, it's impossible to watch them all live, because they are the
only ones who don't have to actually attend any of them themselves. We see the other tributes take
their places, some looking like they could win this hands down, others looked as though they
weren't even old enough to be entered. Especially the little girl from District 11. As soon as
District 12 had been shown, as though on cue, Haymitch came stumbling in.

"I miss supper?" he drawled, before vomiting all over the floor and falls into the mess. Peeta and I
couldn't help but laugh, but Effie stands up.

"Oh yes, very amusing. Just remember this man is the one who can keep you alive in there, so by
all means, laugh away." She stomps off, presumably to her own bedroom. We stop laughing at
look at each other.

"She's right," I said. "Come on, let's get him cleaned up." Together we heave his unconscious
body into his room, and deciding it wouldn't be a good idea to put him on the expensive looking
bed covers, we haul him into the shower.

"Go on, I've got this," Peeta said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, don't worry." He smiles at me again, and I leave the two of them to it. Undressing, and
slipping into the soft bedsheets, I was barely able to keep my eyes open as my head hit the pillow.
My last thought though, was of Peeta, and how on earth would I be able to kill him if the time
ever came to it?

A/N: The quote about Peeta at the end of the memory, was taken from Doctor Who.
Amelia Pond, The Girl Who Waited, Season 6, Episode 10
Chapter 3

I woke up the following morning and completely forgot where I was. I rolled back into my bedroom wall, but it wasn't there, and moments later I crashed onto the floor, my feet still up on the bed. My door slid open, and as I tilted my head to see better, an upside down image of Peeta was coming closer to me, chuckling.

"I'm not normally this clumsy, honestly," I said, blushing furiously as I tried to stand up, though the harder I tried the more of a state I got into. "I just forgot where I was!"

"Of course you did, Cora," he grinned, helping me to my feet, but there was a twinkle in his eye which told me he was joking. He suddenly seemed to realise he was stood in my room, wearing nothing but a t-shirt, one that showed off his muscles, and a pair of boxers. I wasn't much better, just in a short nightdress and underpants. He quickly went back into his room to get dressed, and after a quick wash, I threw on the same clothes from yesterday. They weren't really creased up and were still clean, so there was no point in wasting them. I made sure to pin the mockingjay to my blouse before I left. When I got to the dining car, Effie was reading a newspaper, while Haymitch and Peeta were at the table, talking. Peeta saw me and looked embarrassed, but quickly recovered. As soon as I sat down, I was served breakfast. Peeta was holding a bread roll, and dunking it into a mug of brown liquid next to him.

"They call it hot chocolate," he smiled. I took a sip of the one next to me, and it was so warm and creamy. I finished the whole mug before I even attempted to start on anything else. Once that was drained, I had a look at what else there was. I was careful not to over indulge. I didn't want to admit it, but last night's supper had been rather too rich for what I'm used to, so I was feeling a bit sick afterwards. I ate a plate of ham and eggs, then I picked at a couple of the rolls next to me. They were nothing like the ones we had a home, even from the bakery. These were so soft. Just like eating clouds.

"So you're supposed to give us some advice?" I asked Haymitch, as he filled his coffee mug with more of the amber liqueur from last night. He took a large swig and grinned.

"Here's some advice. Stay alive!" He chuckled at his own joke, while I exchanged a look with Peeta. I was shocked at the hardness in his eyes, they were normally so soft and gentle.

"That's very funny," Peeta said, then stood up, lashing out and knocking Haymitch's mug out of his hand. It smashes to the floor, sending the contents everywhere. "Only not to us."

Haymitch seems to consider this for a moment, then stands up and punches Peeta in the face. He turned back to get more alcohol, but I pick up the knife next to me and drive it into the table between his hand and the bottle, barely missing his fingers.

"That is mahogany," gasps Effie, only looking away from her paper to tell me so.

I brace myself to deflect his punch, but it doesn't come. Instead, he sits back, looking at us and smiling.

"Well, well, well. Look's like I got myself a couple of fighters this year," he said, grinning. Peeta had a cut under his left eye, so leaned over to put some ice on it, but Haymitch stopped him.

"Don't, let the bruise show Peeta. The audience will think you've mixed it up with another tribute before the Games."

"But that's against the rules," Peeta replied, the swelling and bruising beginning to show.

"Only if they catch you," winked Haymitch, sitting back down at the table, and taking a bite out of a sausage, grinning. He turned to me. "So, what is your weapon of choice?"

I thought back to those times in the woods, just outside of the Meadow in District 12, where Gale and Katniss would try and teach me to shoot with a bow and arrow. About how useless I was, until Katniss had the good idea to try my with a knife. I felt at home with a knife in my hand. I may not have been as accurate as she was, but I made some pretty clean kills, and I had no problems skinning and gutting the animal, ready to cook.

"I'm not too bad with a knife," I told him.

"Prove it," he says. I yank the knife out of the table, from where I nearly stabbed his hand less
than five minutes before, and threw it at the wall. It flipped impressively in mid-air and landed in the centre of a large chocolate cake, standing up perfectly.

"Well, look at you, you just killed a cake," Haymitch said dryly, but smiling at the same time. Peeta looked impressed. "Ok, front and centre." We both looked at him. "Stand in the middle of the room," he said. We obeyed and stood in the middle of the dining car, and he began to circle us, like we were at a cattle show. Poking our faces, checking our muscles, lifting our arms up and down, examining our face, until he was finally satisfied.

"Not bad. You're not entirely hopeless by the looks of you both. Seem fit. And once the stylists get hold of you, you'll be attractive enough." I didn't question this. I knew the Hunger Games weren't a beauty competition, but the more attractive tributes tended to pull in the better sponsors. These were usually, but not always, the Career tributes; those from Districts 1, 2 and 4. The trouble with some of the stylists in the Capitol was that they usually wanted to - and sometimes did - enhance the tributes with ridiculous plastic surgery. I was just hoping and praying we weren't landed with one of those.

"All right, I'll make a deal with you," said Haymitch, finally. "You two don't interfere with my drinking, and I'll stay sober enough to help you stay alive." Peeta looked at me and raised an eyebrow slightly. It wasn't much of a deal, but it was a lot better than where we were a few minutes ago, where we had no help at all. Before I could answer, Peeta spoke up.

"Fine, we'll do it," he said.

"So help us. When we get into the arena, what's the best strategy at the Cornucopia for someone - " I started, but Haymitch interrupted me.

"Slow down, slow down. One thing at a time, okay sweetheart?" He looked me in the eye. "Now, in a few minutes, we'll be pulling into the station. From there, you'll be put in the hands of your stylists. You won't like what they are going to do to you, but don't resist."

"But what -"

"No ifs. No buts. Don't resist. It will be alot better for you if you do as I say." He picked up a bottle of his favourite amber coloured spirits and headed out of the car to his bedroom, presumably.

"Cora, what do you think they'll do to us?" Peeta asked me, sitting down on one of the little sofas. I sat down next to him and curled up, tucking my legs up underneath me. His shirt, the same one he was wearing at supper last night, was just that bit too tight, clinging to his muscles.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm just hoping we get some one with a little bit of common sense." Peeta laughed and nodded.

"Fingers cros-" He suddenly stopped and stared out of the window. My stomach dropped as I too, looked out of the window. We were here. In school, we were once told that the Capitol was placed in the north west of what used to be North America, just west of the Rocky mountains. These mountains were still here, they formed a natural barrier between District 1 and the Capitol. A tunnel had been created, so the trains could pass through easily, although it was the only way you could enter the Capitol from the eastern districts. It was a great strategic point during the war, which had later led to the rebellion, the dark days, and then finally to my becoming a tribute.

Peeta and I sat in silence as the tunnel went on and on, the lights in the carriage flickering a little in the darkness of the tunnel. I felt his hand slip into mine and squeeze it. I squeezed his back and before I could say anything to him, the bright sunlight came pouring in through the large windows as we emerged from the tunnel.

"Good luck," he smiled. I leaned over and kissed him gently on his cheek, where Haymitch had punched him.

"You too." The outskirts of the Capitol began to spring up before us, and soon we could see the large white buildings, the bright colours of the people milling about, and as we got closer to the station, my stomach began to flip somersaults. The train slowed down and came to halt, and outside, there were crowds of people, jostling each other to see us, to get close to us. They had recognised our train as a district train, so there seemed to be quite a bit of excitement.

"Hard to believe it's all for us, isn't it?" I joked. "Ready?"

"Ready," Peeta replied, squeezing my hand one last time.
The doors slid open, and I took Peeta's lead, smiling and waving at the crowds. Well, we wanted to make a good impression, didn't we? After all, who know if some of the sponsors were in this crowd? We were taken straight to a sleek, black car by Effie, which seemed to glide through the crowds effortlessly and within ten minutes, we had arrived at, what Effie called, the Training Centre. It was a tall, imposing building, which still seemed to blend in well with the surrounding buildings. This would be our home for the next week, while we were going to be trained how to kill each other.
Chapter 4

~ Peeta's POV ~
She kissed me. I didn't know if it was intentional or for the sake of the Capitol crowds, but right now I didn't care. The bruise, where Haymitch punched me, was starting to sting a little. I could feel the blood pumping there now. Not that I cared. Mum hit me all the time, I was used to the pain. We finally arrived at the Training Centre, and Cora was taken in one direction, while I went in another. When her name was called out the day before, my stomach dropped. But - and I hate myself for thinking this - I'm just glad it wasn't Katniss. I've been in love with Katniss Everdeen since I was five years old, but I'm pretty sure she is going out with Gale, Cora's brother. Why is it my luck, that every girl I notice, even a little, it always ends up back at Gale Hawthorne. I sighed inwardly as I was stripped bare and put into a blue cotton gown, then laid on a table while they began to wash me down.

~ Cora's POV ~
'You won't like what they do, but don't resist,' Haymitch had said. What on earth were they going to do to me? I was led into a room, as Effie promised she would see me very soon, stripped down to my bare skin, and given a blue cotton gown to put on. I've had hair ripped from my skin, hair ripped from places I didn't even know existed, my nails filed down to a uniformly straight length, and I was scrubbed and washed down three times before my prep team seemed almost satisfied. By the time I've been in the Remake Centre, in the Training Centre, for three hours, I'm starting to getting frustrated. I've not resisted to anything they've done, but it's been painful. "This should be the last one," said Venia, a woman with aqua hair and gold tattoos above her eyebrows. I gripped the edge of the table I was led on as she layered yet another strip with wax and placed it on my leg. R-i-i-i-p. I bit the inside of my cheek as it came off. "Sorry," she said, in her strange Capitol accent. "You were just so hairy." I sighed quietly, as I realised this was how the turkeys that Gale brought home felt. Flavius, with his orange, corkscrew locks, walked up the table. "You did very well," he said, as he applied yet another layer of purple lipstick to himself. "If there's one thing we can't stand, it's a whiner. Grease her down," he instructed Venia and Octavia, a plump woman with pea green skin. I was still waiting to see my stylist, but apparently he wasn't interested in seeing me until I was ready. 'Haymitch, I've done what you asked of me,' I thought to myself, 'but this had better be over soon.' The two women began to rub me down with this lotion that really stung at first, but as they began to rub it in, it was soothing. I was then stripped of the little cotton gown and placed in the middle of the room, completely naked. The three of them began pecking around me like hens, plucking a stray hair here, smoothing a eyebrow out there. I guess I should have been embarrassed, but they were so unlike people that was amusing. Finally, Flavius stood up. "You're done," he said, in his clipped accent. "You almost look like a human being now," he smiled, and Venia and Octavia laughed.
"Thankyou," I smiled sweetly. Their comment grates on me, but I want them to know I am grateful. "We don't have much cause to look nice in District 12." This seems to have been the right thing to say, because all three of them start cooing and ahhing.
"Of course you don't, you poor thing," Flavius said, soothingly, patting me on my arm. "But don't worry, by the time Cinna is through with you, you are going to look absolutely gorgeous. You won't recognise yourself." The three of them left, leaving me standing naked and alone in the cold white room, waiting for Cinna. My natural instincts told me to put my gown back on, but my stylist would only tell me to take it off again, so I raised my hair to my hair. The prep team had been told to leave it alone, as I had braided it in such a beautiful way, that Effie wanted to keep it like that.

The door opened behind me, and in walked a young man. I was shocked at how normal he looked - for the Capitol's standards. The only thing about him I could see that said "Capitol", was a hint
of gold eyeliner on his eyelids, contrasting beautifully with his caramel coloured skin. It brought out the flecks of gold in his green eyes. His simple black shirt and tan coloured trousers were elegant and sophisticated.

"Hello Cordelia, I'm Cinna," he said, holding out his hand for me to shake. He didn't seem to have the same clipped accent that I had spent three hours listening to, or the same one Effie has. "Hello," I said, nervously. "Just give me a moment," he said, and he began to circle me, taking in every inch of my body with his eyes, but not touching me. "Who did your hair?"

"I did," I said. "It's exquisite. You have clever fingers."

I had been expecting someone flamboyant, someone older trying desperately to make themselves look younger, someone who viewed me as a piece of meat to be placed decoratively on a platter. Cinna was, surprisingly, none of these. "You're new, aren't you?" I asked him. They normally showed the stylists on tv, but I hadn't seen him before. "Yes."

"And they lumped you with District 12."

"I asked for District 12," he said, evasively. "Why don't you put your gown back on and we'll talk." He handed me the gown, which I put on quickly, and I followed him through a door I hadn't seen earlier. There in front of me was a table, and two small sofas. I sat on one, while Cinna took the one opposite.

"So, you're here to make me look pretty," I said, trying, and failing, at humour. "I'm here to help you make an impression." I looked out of the large window next to me. It was the size of the wall itself, and below I can see the residents of the Capitol going about their daily business. We were so high up, however, that they just looked like ants. Brightly coloured ants. I guessed by the light outside, it was about noon. I wondered what mum would be doing. Would Gale be okay? Would Posy be able to sleep without me there? I looked back over to Cinna, and tried to discreetly wipe away a tear. He pressed a button on the little table next to his sofa, and the table in between us opened up, and a large platter full of food appeared, along with two plates, two sets of cutlery, two glasses and so on. Chicken and chunks of orange cooked in a creamy sauce, laid on top of a bed of pearly white grain, tiny bright green peas and onions, rolls shaped like flowers, and for dessert, a creamy pudding the colour of honey. It smelt amazing, but I was shocked at the sheer amount of it. It was enough to feed my family for at least a week. "We must seem despicable to you," Cinna said, seemingly reading my mind. "Never mind," he said, brushing it off. As we sat and ate, he went on to tell me that his partner Portia, who was Peeta's stylist, had agreed with Cinna that Peeta and I would be wearing complimentary costumes.

My heart dropped. Great, I thought, we'll be in coal miners outfits, like they usually do. At least he said we would be wearing outfits. Some years, I had seen the poor tributes from our district in nothing but coal dust.

At about 6 o'clock that evening, I was underneath the Training Centre with the other tributes. Cinna had exceed all my expectations, and more. I was wearing a pair of black fitted trousers, and a shirt that looked like it was done up as a corset, from my neck down to my toes. When I moved around, it glittered and sparkled in the lights. I had black, knee high boots on, with a small heel, nothing too high. Long, fitted sleeves, and from each shoulder, hung a long, thing piece of fabric, which flowed out down each side of me like a gentle flame. Peeta was in black, knee high, chunky boots, with a buckle at the outside ankle of each foot. His trousers and shirt were made of the same, glittering material as my clothes. He had a light flowing cape attached behind him. "At least we aren't naked," he laughed. "True," I grinned, "but I'm pretty sure I heard Cinna say something about fire." "Yeah Portia said the same thing, I'm starting to get worried."

Our stylists had decided they weren't going to focus on the - very over done - coal miners, because that's what District 12 is known for, it's coal. They wanted to focus on the coal itself. Portia and Cinna met us by our chariot, where our horses were stood waiting for their cue. They were
stunning, tall, and strapping. Their black hair so soft and smooth, with white roses draped across their graceful manes.
"You're not afraid of fire, are you?" Cinna asked, then grinned, as he and Portia arranged our stances and outfits as we stood on the chariot. The horses were so well trained, they knew exactly where to go, when to stop and so on. As the chariot moved off, behind the other eleven chariots, Peeta turned to me.
"I'll rip yours off, if you rip mine off."
"Deal."

~ Peeta's POV ~
We pressed the buttons on our sleeves, just as Portia as instructed us, as we emerged from the tunnel underneath the Training Centre. I held my breath as my costume began to slowly light up. I looked over to Cora, and she was alight, just like me. I braced myself for the searing heat, but it never came. Instead, a cool, breezy, tickling sensation overcame us, and I smiled at Cora. Her hair was braided, then wrapped around the base of her head and she looked stunning. As we emerged from the tunnel in the fading light of the evening, our costumes seemed to set their air alight, and the crowd cheered and shouted louder than I'd ever heard them cheer. They were calling out to us, throwing roses to us. Cora slipped her hand into mine, and I jumped back slightly.
"Come on, they'll love it," she said. I smiled and slipped my hand into hers, the both of us gripping on tightly for fear of falling out. Cora caught a rose in her hand as it was thrown down from someone in the crowd; she inhaled its scent then smiled, lifting it up in the air. I raised my arm, the hand with Cora's gripping on tightly, and together we rode with pride, our arms in the air, a sign of unity, with our flames flickering brightly behind us. The chariots came to a halt, and President Snow welcomed us all to the Capitol, made a small speech, then the horses made their way back to the Training Centre. I didn't want to let go of her hand, it felt so soft in mine.

~ Cora's POV ~
The last of our flames flickered out gently as we entered the chamber where we had left in the chariots earlier. Peeta stepped down from the chariot and then held his hand out to help me down. It wasn't very high, but it was still really sweet.
"You were fantastic," Cinna said, walking over to us. Effie came over too, arms open wide, to hug the both of us.
"So beautiful," she gushed, fiddling with my hair, like a parent would to a child.
"Thank you Effie," I smiled. "Where's Haymitch?"
"He'll be here in a moment, he's just talking to some of his friends. Ah here he is now." Haymitch came over with a woman in tow, a very beautiful woman.
"This is Willow Monroe," he said, introducing her to us. "She is one of the mentors for District 7 and a very good friend of mine."
"I just wanted to say I loved your costumes," Willow said to Peeta and I. "I've been in this game for over 20 years and I've never seen anything like it. You have amazing stylists, I'm so jealous," she grinned.
"District 7 is lumber isn't it?" Peeta asked her.
"Yeah," she nodded, "which usually means we are dressed as trees. We really need a decent stylist li-" She stopped as Cinna came over to say hello, I assume after hearing what she had said.
"Cinna is it? You are amazing, so talented."
"Thank you," he smiled, taking her hand.
"Well it was nice to meet you both," Willow said, "but I had better get back to my daughter."
"Is she one of the tributes?" I gasped.
"No, she's one of the mentors, Acacia."
"I remember her Games," Peeta told her, "she was inspiring, and somehow familiar."
"Thank you," Willow smiled, and went back off to her own tributes.
We made our way up to the elevators, so we could see where we would be sleeping. Each district had their own floor in the tower, and as we were from twelve, we had the top floor, the penthouse. I was just looking forward to getting something to eat and laying down somewhere warm.
Chapter 5

I woke up early the next morning. I rolled over to look at the clock next to my bed and rolled back over, throwing the duvet over my head when I saw it said 6:20am. I sighed and threw my legs out of the bed. I never had a shower last night because I was just so tired from the parade and dinner, so I just had a quick wash, took all my make up off and fell into bed. This morning, I had the chance to really check the Capitols showers. There so many buttons, it took me a while to work out which ones I needed. Or rather wanted. As I stood under the hot stream of water, last night's dreams came flooding back to me and hit me like a brick wall. I had been running through the woods with Gale and Peeta, trying to reach my family, who were starving, pale and emaciated. President Snow arrived and I felt the ground shake. The mines exploded and I began to run towards to them, to try and save my dad, but Peeta and Gale stopped me. Some of the burning coal rubble was thrown into the air and landed right at my feet. I felt a searing heat next to me, and when I looked over, Peeta was screaming, on fire, and I couldn't save him. It was a few moments before I realised that the salty water dripping down my face wasn't from the shower. I was crying. It was just a dream, I told myself. Peeta's still alive. For now, anyway. Pulling myself together, I tried some of the buttons that looked as though they would produce soap. My favourite was the one that was labelled 'wild cherry'. It was a gentle scent, with intoxicating fruity tones, but not too much. I'd never eaten cherry before, but if it tasted as good as it smelled, I would probably live on it! After rinsing my hair out for a fourth time, I realised I would have to get out at some point, and now was as good a time as any. I turned the jets of water and foam off, wrapped the biggest, fluffiest towel I had ever seen around myself, and after squeezing as much water out as I could, I wrapped my hair up in yet another fluffy towel. I rubbed myself dry and found a button for moisturiser. After rubbing myself all over in the wild cherry one (I really liked that one), I went into my bedroom to find an outfit on my bed, and a note from Cinna, saying this is what I was to wear for my first day of Training. I dried my hair, and braided it how it was yesterday, but left it to hang down the side of me, then dressed in the clothes from Cinna. Tight fitting black trousers, a burgundy tunic and black leather shoes. At least it was something normal this time.

We weren't given an exact time to meet for breakfast, so I left my bedroom and made my way down to the penthouse's dining room, finding it empty. There was, however, a large table just behind it, filled with plates and plates of food. I asked the boy stood next to the food if I could help myself and he nodded. Effie explained to Peeta and I that he was an Avox, as were all the rest of them serving us. That meant they had their tongues cut in such a way that they were unable to speak, and were basically servants for whoever the Capitol wanted them to be. It was horrible, but you weren't allowed to speak to them unless it was to give an order, or ask a question. I piled a plate high with sausages, eggs, bacon, and a couple of slices of pale purple melon, then sat at the dining table, facing the window, watching the sun rise slowly into the sky. It was the same sun that mum would be seeing right about now. I wondered what they would be doing. Would Gale be out to see Katniss? Would my little brothers be on their way to school? I pushed the thought of them out of my head, I didn't want to start crying again.

~ Gale's POV ~

It was too early in the morning to go to school, but I needed to get out of the house. I made sure mum was up to sort out Posy, Rory and Vick, and then I headed to the woods. I found the quiet spot that Katniss favoured, and just sat watching everything pass by, watched the sun rise, the birds flit to and fro. The grass was still covered in the morning dew, so I had made sure to carry a blanket in my bag so I didn't get wet sitting down. My mind wandered back to last night, where we had sat and watched the Tributes Parade. The one my sister was in. Caesar Flickerman's blue hair came on screen, as it did every year during the Games, though always a different colour. He was sat with Claudius Templesmith, discussing the tributes as each chariot came out of the tunnel. District 1, the Luxury district, looked ridiculous as usual, covered from head to toe in brightly coloured furs, feathers and gemstones. District 4 was fishing, so they had them dressed up as some
ancient god called Neptune. He was apparently the god of the sea or something. District 10 was livestock, so they were dressed in the usual cowboy outfits. I was really hoping Cora had been given someone who knew what they were doing, and not someone who thought it was quaint to dress us up like some giant toys. When Cora and Peeta's chariot came out I - "Hey Gale."
"Catnip, you made me jump, I didn't hear you." I moved over on the blanket so there was room for Katniss to sit down next to me.
"How're you holding up? Okay, that's a stupid question, forget I asked." She cuddled in close to me and rested her head on my shoulder. "So, Cora's entrance?" she said. I smiled.
"Yeah, my heart was in my throat when I saw the flames, I thought they'd really set her on fire, but they looked ok. I can see what they are going to say now, Cordelia Hawthorne, the girl on fire." I let out a smile. My first one since Cora's name had been pulled out of that ball two days ago. And today was her sixteenth birthday. I was going to try and teach her on the bow and arrow again. Instead, she is in the Capitol, surrounded by - by them. At least Peeta was there. That made me feel better. Katniss seemed to read my thoughts.
"Peeta's a good guy," she said.
"I know, Catnip," I replied, kissing her on the top of her head.
"I never told you this, but he, he saved my life once." I opened my mouth to say something, but thought it best to let her carry on. "After the explosion that, well you know, mum was so deep in her depression that there were days she couldn't even get out of bed, I would be the one to get Prim up, feed her, get her to school, try and find food. For years I resented her so much, but that's changed. Anyway, it was a month before my twelfth birthday, we hadn't had anything but mint leaves and hot water for three or four days and I was trying to sell some of Prim's old baby clothes outside the Hob." I instinctively wrapped my arm round her shoulder at this point, when she paused to try and swallow down a sob. "No-one wanted them," she continued, "it was raining, I was so weak and when I tripped over and dropped the clothes in the mud, I just didn't care. That was when I smelt the bread. Freshly baking in the bakery, so I made my way over, quietly, and tried to see if there was anything in the bins of the butchers, the bakers, the fishmongers. Anything to feed my little sister so who now so weak, she could barely sit up. Mrs Mellark came out and saw me, started screaming at me that she was sick of the kids from the Seam trying to steal from her all the time. She shoed me away and slammed the door as she stomped back into the bakery. That was when I heard a crash and a slap, and she screamed at someone being a "stupid boy."
Peeta came out of the bakery with two large loaves of bread, burnt at one end. Mrs Mellark came out, still screaming at him that he was stupid and that no-one would want to buy burnt bread, he was to feed it to the pigs. I watched him as he ripped a piece of the burnt bread off and threw it into the pig pen next to the bakery. He then looked behind him, made sure she had gone in, and without even looking at me, he threw me the loaves of bread. They landed at my feet, so I just picked them up, stuffed them under my shirt and ran home as fast as I could. I've never found out why he did it, but if it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here now."
"Oh Catnip, I didn't know," I said, shocked at what she had just told me.
"I see him at school sometimes, he's in class with me and Cora, but it wasn't until the reaping that I truly recognised him. He'll look after Cora, I promise."
Breakfast had certainly been interesting. While I was on my second plate of lamb stew with plums and wild grain (I had to admit, it was my favourite dish I'd had since arriving in the Capitol), Peeta and Haymitch arrived. While Peeta had more bread rolls dunked in his hot chocolate, Haymitch went for the stew.

"Ok, let's get down to business," Haymitch said, leaning back in his chair, after finishing his fourth plate. "Training. Am I coaching you together or separately?"

"Why would you train us separately," Peeta asked.

"In case one of you has a secret skill you don't want the other one to know about, for instance." I exchanged a look with Peeta.

"I don't have any secret skills," he said, "and I already know what yours is. I've eaten enough of your turkeys." This seemed to pull me up. I'd never really thought about Peeta eating the turkeys I killed. I just assumed the baker would cook a piece up for himself, or maybe feed it to the pigs even. Ever since Gale had encouraged me to try out the knives, I would kill probably two or three turkeys once a month, or once every other month, then trade them in the Hob, or give one to the baker. I would always skin them and them first, clean them up before I traded them on, and Greasy Sae in the Hob would always comment on how neatly I had done so. I just assumed the Merchant families ate the more expensive meat; beef, chicken, or horse. Wild turkeys were usually the gourmet of the Seam.

"You can coach us together," I said, and Peeta nodded in agreement.

"Alright, so give me some idea of what you can do."

"I can bake bread, if you count that," Peeta said. Haymitch shook his head.

"Nope sorry. What about you, Cora? I already know you are great with a knife. Is there anything else?" He asked me.

"I'm pretty good at combat fighting. Growing up with three brothers has really helped with that," I chuckled. Peeta seemed to avoid my gaze and my stomach hit the floor. Oh god, I forgot. He gave me a weak smile and tried to laugh a little.

"Yeah, I know a bit about that!" he said.

"And you're good?" Haymitch asked, taking a bite out of a bread roll.

"Yeah I'm not too bad."

"She's excellent," said Peeta, joining in properly. When we were twelve, I saw her get jumped on by three of the biggest kids in the school. Malin's older brother and his friends. They were bullies, they made Malin look like a princess. Cora came out of that fight with just a black eye and a few scratches. They were all suffering from broken bones, black eyes, their blood was dripping down their noses like a bath tap." He remembers that? I had completely forgotten, but then I had been in so many fights, usually cat fights because some of the girls didn't like the way I would hang around Gale. It wasn't until afterwards they would realise I was actually his sister. Well if he was going to talk me up, then I was going to do the same.

"Peeta's strong. He can lift a 50 kilo bag of flour like it's nothing," I said.

"Yeah and I'm sure the arena's going to be full flour bags for me to throw at people," he scoffs. This seemed to have rubbed him up the wrong way, because he scrapes back his chair and walks back off into his room.

Effie and Haymitch came to the elevator to say good bye to Peeta and I, and to wish us luck.

"One last thing, before you leave," Haymitch says, before we can step in. "When you're out in public, you stay together. Side by side, every minute of the day, understand?" We both nodded assent. "Good, now off you go," he smiled, and stepped back.

Only tributes were allowed down in the Training Arena, so they stayed behind to do - well, whatever it was they had to do. We were still ten minutes early for training, but it seemed we were the last to arrive. We were also the only ones dressed the same. Haymitch must have really meant we would be together, showing unity at all times. The other tributes had gathered in a tense circle.
in the middle of the room, with cloth numbers pinned to their backs. Someone came over and pinned a number 12 to mine and Peeta's back, then we made our way over to the others. As soon as we arrive, our instructor, a woman named Atala, stepped up and began to explain about the different skill stations. We weren't allowed to practise combative skills with the other tributes - there were assistants on hand if we needed a partner. We were free to travel around the stations, as per our mentors instructions, so once she had finished explaining to us, I turned to Peeta.

"What do you want to try out first?" I asked.

"Well Haymitch said I wasn't to show off my strength, to wait for the private sessions with the Gamemakers, and you were to stay away from the knife throwing. What do you think?"

"I reckon we should look at the snares," I said. "Gale has always said if you can make a snare you can eat." We stayed at the snare station for about an hour, then went to learn how to tie some knots, then over to the fire making station. By the time they told us to stop for lunch, I suddenly realised I was hungry. We sat down to plates of fruit, cakes, and other various light foods. Nothing that would be too heavy on our stomachs. After lunch, Peeta suggested we try the camouflage station, so we got there before anyone else tried to take it over. I sampled a few different things with berry juices and mud and clay, but it was Peeta who seemed to really excel at this one. I stopped what I was doing and stared in awe at his arm, which now resembled a tree trunk. The light and the shadows hitting just the right spots.

"That's stunning," I said, making Peeta blush.

"Thanks. I make the cakes."

"The cakes?"

"Yeah, the ones at home. I decorate them myself." I gasped as I realised the boy standing in front of me was the one whose hands had made such delicate, exquisite, and beautiful cakes. They were breath taking, certainly not something you would expect a 16 year old boy to do. I liked taking Posy and Rory into town sometimes to look at them in the window. The ones for New Year were so beautiful, and the birthday cakes, so delicate, with intricate patterns and colours. I remembered the cake the baker had given me on the train and couldn't help but smile. So Peeta was the one who had made my favourite food in the world.

I peeled off my outfit and lay it on the end of the bed, being told an Avox would collect it, so it would be cleaned and dried ready for tomorrow. I stepped into the shower and let the constant stream of hot water rush over me. I pressed the button for the wild cherry soap again, and once I was clean again, I dried and flipped through the wardrobe for something to wear. After a few moments of searching, I found a pale pink dress which, when teamed with a pair of flat, brown, leather sandals, made me feel like a princess. It was my birthday after all, and even though no-one had remembered this year (not that I was expecting them to), I still wanted to look pretty, even for a few moments.

~ Peeta's POV ~

I was the first at the dining table tonight. I'd jumped into the shower and quickly washed myself down, then I dressed in a simple cotton shirt, and trousers, then headed straight off. I wanted to be there when Cora saw her little surprise I had arranged. When she walked in, I couldn't take my eyes off of her, she was breath taking. Her dress was sat on her perfectly, the thick band clinched in her waist, giving her an hourglass silhouette. The skirt splayed gently outwards from her hips to just below her knees, and the bodice wrapped over on itself both front and back, revealing just a bare hint of cleavage. It was simple, and demure, but really quite beautiful. She sat down next to me, smiling, her long black wavy hair, in loose curls, splayed down her back, near to her hips. I could feel my cheeks getting hot, and I'm pretty sure she saw me blushing. As she reached over for her cutlery, her hand brushed up against mine and I felt a warm stirring in my chest; something I hadn't felt about anyone since I was thirteen, and Katniss had smiled at me in the school corridor once. This was something different, however. Something much stronger. After a delicious five course meal, Effie sat grinning at the pair of us. Cinna and Portia had joined us for dinner tonight aswell.

"Well, it's a very special day today," Effie said. "Peeta has told me it's your birthday, Cora." Cora
looked over at me, smiling. "I didn't think anyone had remembered, I just assumed no-one would in the given circumstances." "Don't be daft," I said, furiously trying to stop myself from burning up through blushing. "I remember your birthday every year." Her face lit up like a Christmas tree in surprise and joy that I knew her birthday. Effie nodded at the Avox stood behind me, and he left the room. A minute later he was back with the birthday cake I asked Effie to order for Cora, and I had to admit, it was even better than I could have done myself.

~ Cora's POV ~
What the Avox brought out my birthday cake, I was nearly in tears. I couldn't believe something so exquisite was made for me. Just for me. Obviously I would be sharing, but it was MY birthday cake. The ones Peeta usually made back in Twelve were amazing, but this was something else. When we cut into it, the white chocolate roses, which had been piped around the edges and on the top, opened up to reveal a pink strawberry sponge inside, separated by soft white butter cream.

After supper, I caught Peeta in the corridor.
"Can we talk?" I asked.
"Sure," he nodded. I grabbed a little cardigan from my room quickly, and he led me up the stairs to the roof.
"Are we allowed up here?"
"Yeah, Cinna brought me up here earlier. I asked if we were allowed, and he said it wasn't a problem. Watch." I followed him to the edge of the roof and he leant over the wall and threw a stone. It came straight back up moments later. "There's a force field, it stops someone from jumping off." I wandered over to the little garden behind us, and couldn't help but put my nose down into the flowers and inhale deeply. I turned back around to find Peeta stood right behind me. He was inches away from me now.
"The birthday cake," I started. He began to look worried. "I know we've been sent here to die," I said, "so there's something I want to say before we do. Peeta, I like you. I mean really like you. I've had strong feelings for you quite a while now, although I don't think you noticed me before now. I -"

Peeta interrupted me.
"No, you're right. For a while I didn't, but then one day you were there in my life. I love it when you come to the bakery, even if it's just to look in the window. I said I remembered your birthday. I meant it. I would make sure the cake was ready for when your brother came to trade for it, though if I had my way, I would have given it to you for nothing." He slid his hand up my back and into my hair, cupping the back of my head. I snaked my arms around his neck and moved in to him, leaving no space between our chests. I could feel him getting excited against my thigh, and I'm pretty sure he could feel my breasts pushed up against his body.
"Happy birthday Cora," he murmured, leaning down into me. I moved my face up and his lips brushed softly against mine, pressing down gently with each movement. Our lips were moving as one, and I couldn't help but notice a faint hint of roses coming from him. With his free hand, he began to stroke it up and down my back, causing me to let out a small moan, and I smiled through the kiss. He gently flicked my tongue against his lips as they kissed me, and he opened them, using his tongue to tease mine. We could have been like that for a few minutes, or for an hour, I didn't know and I didn't care. But when we pulled apart, it was as though something had changed between us. It was as though he felt the same about me, as I did about him. I didn't want him to go anywhere, I wanted to keep him here, his arms wrapped around me, keeping me safe.
"What do we do now?" I asked, resting my forehead against his.
"Take each day as it comes," he said. "Enjoy it, and just hope that that day never arrives." I nodded silently. I knew which day he was talking about; the day we were to go into the arena and kill each other.
As we went back down to our rooms, hand in hand, a thought appeared in my head and kept niggling away. A thought I desperately tried to ignore. Does Peeta Mellark really like me, or is he
niggling away. A thought I desperately tried to ignore. Does Peeta Mellark really like me, or is he just doing this as a game strategy? I didn't want to think that though. I was just happy that I had finally got to kiss him.
Chapter 7

~ Peeta’s POV ~
As I said goodnight to Cora and watched her close her bedroom door, that warm stirring in my chest from earlier returned. I didn't realise until now that it was Cora I wanted to be with. Although thinking about it, it was kind of obvious in retrospect. Jasper, the middle brother of the three of us, would always tease me about how I would stare at her when she came into the bakery. Telling me that's why I was so clumsy all the time. I never believed him of course, I mean until now, I always thought it was Katniss, but all I wanted to do right now was knock on Cora's door and kiss her again. Instead, I made do with closing my bedroom door, undressing and crawling into the soft sheets in nothing but my underwear.

The next day, I awoke to Effie banging on my door telling me to "get up, up, up, for it's another big, big, big day." I rolled out of bed, had a quick shower and when I came back into my room to get dried, I found my clothes for the day had already been placed on the end of my bed - the same ones from yesterday, washed and dried. Today was similar to yesterday - sticking by Cora's side, going from station to station, trying out different ways to keep ourselves alive. Only today, we had the added thrill of holding hands when no-one was looking, sitting closer than we normally would have done. By the time we had dinner and everyone had begun to settle for the night, I pulled Haymitch to one side.

"Haymitch, is it too late to change my mind?"
"About what?" he asked. I took a deep breath.
"I want to be trained separately. I have an idea on something, but I need to think on it overnight."
"Okay, just explain to me in the morning. I need sleep right now." I watched as he staggered off in to his room, flask of something alcoholic more than likely, in his hand.

~ Cora’s POV ~
I woke up on our last day of training to Effie once again rapping on the door, telling me to get "up, up, up, it's going to be a big, big, big day". I rolled out of bed, had a quick shower and when I came back into my room to get dried, I found my clothes for the day had already been placed on the end of my bed - the same ones from yesterday, washed and dried. Today was similar to yesterday - sticking by Cora's side, going from station to station, trying out different ways to keep ourselves alive. Only today, we had the added thrill of holding hands when no-one was looking, sitting closer than we normally would have done. By the time we had dinner and everyone had begun to settle for the night, I pulled Haymitch to one side.

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I woke up on our last day of training to Effie once again rapping on the door, telling me to get "up, up, up, it's going to be a big, big, big day". I jumped into the shower, and after getting dried, dressed in the usual outfit. The morning was spent, again, practising knots and snares, and various other skills we would need in the arena. After lunch, however, we were all called off, one by one, for our private sessions. This was our chance to show them what we could really do, to impress them, to show them what we had been holding back on. Being from District 12, we were going to be called last, so as the dining room slowly emptied, I grew more and more nervous. Finally, as Rue, the little girl from 11 was called in, only Peeta and I were left. We sat in silence, my stomach churning, until Peeta was called.

"Good luck," I said, as he stood up. "Don't forget what Haymitch said about making sure to throw the weights."
"I will, thanks. You... aim straight," he said, smiling a little, then turning round and heading off in to the same room we had just spent two and a half days learning to kill each other. Fifteen minutes later, I was called in. Instantly, I knew I was in trouble. Twenty-three other tributes had gone before me, the Gamemakers had been sat there for too long, drank far too much wine. I assumed there was nothing more some of them wanted to do than go home right now, but instead, they had to sit through me showing them my skills. I cleared my throat.
"Cordelia Hawthorne. District 12." They stopped whatever they were doing, surprised to see me there as though they had forgotten why they were sat there eating and drinking and stuffing themselves stupid, and turned to face me. A young man with short black hair and a very intricately patterned beard nodded for me to continue. I made my way over to the knife station, I had been waiting day to get my hands on these. There were more types of knives than I'd ever seen or imagined. I picked a few up, to test them in my hands and walked over to the target dummies. I got down into the position Gale had taught me, when ready to throw a knife - not stood upright, you'd never get a decent hit - and threw the first blade, aiming for the target on the dummy's chest. It was heavier than I was used to though, so I missed by a couple of inches. I cursed myself under
my breath, then threw a few more, getting better with each hit, until finally, I hit my target, on the
fourth blade. I threw a few more, each one hitting exactly where it was aimed at, some hitting fatal
targets. I looked up to the Gamemakers, and was shocked to see that they had gone back to what
they were doing before I entered the room. Laughing, joking, drinking, eating. As I watched, an
Avox brought in a large roasted pig, with the biggest apple I had seen in my life, stuffed into it's
mouth.
"Hey, who ordered this pig?" the man with the beard joked, playfully slapping some of the others
on the shoulder. I looked at the pig and saw red. I still had one blade left in my hands, so I aimed
for the pigs mouth and threw it, the blade finding and hitting it's target perfectly, pinning the apple
to the wall behind it. The effect was instantaneous. Some of them dropped their wine glasses, one
man's wig fell off and one man fell into the punch bowl behind him. They all turned, wide eyed,
to stare at me.
"Thankyou, for your consideration," I said, curtsying, and leaving the room.

Effie wasn't impressed later that evening.
"Are you crazy?" she snapped.
"I just got mad," I replied
"You realise your actions reflect badly on all of us? Not just you," she yelled at me, as I sat on the
sofa with Peeta. She was pacing the room, flapping her closed, hand held fan at me, her other
hand on her hip. I don't think I've ever seen her so mad. If I thought about it, I didn't think she
could get mad, she was always so happy, happy, happy. She kept yelling, while Cinna and Portia
sat there looking uncomfortable. Peeta was sat with me, our fingers lightly entwined, hidden
between my left leg and his right.
"They just want a good show, it's fine," said Cinna calmly, trying to soothe the situation.
"How about it's jsut bad manners Cinna? How about that," Effie said. "Well finally, there you
are," Effie said, exasperated. "I hope you know we have a serious situation here." She glared at
me as she said the word 'serious'. Haymitch walked into the sitting area, where we were sat
around the large wall mounted television, and held his thumbs up, grinning at me.
"Nice throwing, sweetheart!" Effie turned her glare to him. "Wh- what did they do when you
threw the knife?"
"Well they looked pretty startled," I said, starting to smile..
"Oh they look startled?" he grinning at Effie, which only seemed to annoy her more, as he
laughed. Cinna and Portia tried, and failed, to hide their grins. "Now what did you say afterwards
- thanks for...." he asked, turning to me.
"Thankyou for your consideration." I was starting to chuckle now, and Effie was the only one
pouting still.
"Genius," said Haymitc, proudly, punching the air.
"I don't think you're going to ind this funny when the Gamemakers take it out on -" she started.
"Take it out on who, exactly. Him? Her? I think they already have. Loosen your corset, have a
drink." Turning to me, he said, seriously, "I would have given anything to see it."
After calming Effie down, the six of us sat around the tv, while Caesar Flickerman read out the
scores we had been given, based on the last few days.
"As you know, the tributes were rated on a scale of one to twelve, after three days of careful
evaluation," the blue haired, Master of Ceremonies was saying to the entirety of Panem. My
stomach fluttered and then dropped. This was it, this was the time they were going to give me the
lowest score, so that the other tributes will see me as easy pickings. I only caught snippets of the
other tributes scores. The boy from One, had a score of 9. The boy from Two, Cato, had a score
of 10. That was the best anyone had really gotten before. The girl from Two, Clove, also got a 10.
Careers. I felt Peeta's fingers tighten around mine as Caesar got closer to our own scores. The little
girl from Eleven, she must have only been jsut 12 years old, she was tiny. Rue, her name was. She
was given a score of 7. That was really good, she must have really impressed the Gamemakers.
"From District 12, Peeta Mellark," Caesar said. The room went silent, my palms were starting get
a little sweaty. "With a score of 8." We all cheered.
"That's brilliant, well done," I said, smiling at him. He was so pleased.
"That's great," he said, "I didn't think I'd impressed them much."
"We can work with that," smiled Effie.
"And finally, from District 12," said Caesar, "Cordelia Hawthorne." We all stopped what we were
doing and stared at the screen. My name seemed to play around his lips a little and I silently
screamed at him to get with it. "With a score of........" Oh god just tell me, stop dragging it out. His
face broke out into a large grin on the screen. "... eleven." I was in shock. Eleven. How was that
possible? That was amazing.
"Congratulations," smiled Peeta, stunned.
"I thought they hated me," I said.
"They must have liked your guts," Haymitch replied, while Effie was cheering around the room,
hugging Cinna. Cinna raised his glass.
"To Cordelia Hawthorne, the girl on fire!"

The next morning I woke up with a smile. After having a shower and getting dried, I noticed that I
didn't have my training clothes from the last two days put on my bed, so I went through the
wardrobe and found a reasonable outfit. I was the last one to the breakfast table by the looks of it
today, well the last except for Peeta.
"Where's Peeta?" I asked Haymitch. he tried to avoid my gaze.
"Err, he's decided he wants to be trained separately now." My stomach dropped like lead. I knew
it, the other night was just a game to him. I felt betrayed. Well, two play at that game. I decided I
wasn't going to let any of it bother me, let it all wash over me, and act like nothing had happened
when I saw him.
"What do you mean by training us separately?" I asked. We only had the interview prep to go, and it's not like we had to stab something or fight hand to hand or anything. But Haymitch avoided answering my question.

"So this morning, you will be with Effie until lunchtime, practising - well whatever Effie needs you to do. Peeta will be with me. After lunch you swap, so you will be with me."

"And what will I be doing with you?" I asked, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice and get on with the day.

"You'll be going over content with me." He didn't elaborate any further, so when Effie turned up, he shooed me away. Effie took me into my room, and showed me what was in the large cover over her arm. A full size ballgown, complete with high heels. I'd never worn high heels before, so this was going to be interesting. They weren't the ones I would be wearing on the night, which I was glad of, as these much have been a good six inches tall at least, and I was struggling to stand in them, let alone walk. I can only assume this dress was made for someone allot taller than me, as I kept tripping over the front of it. It was beautiful, however. It was a red halterneck, with diamante (or possibly even diamonds, you never knew in the Capitol) detailing across the bosom, and it flowed out into a floor length skirt. However, even with the heels, I was still tripping over. I tried to lift the skirt of the dress up, at which point Effie wailed slightly.

"No, never above the ankles." It took nearly two hours, but I finally conquered not only standing up in the heels, but walking as well. I now had to spend the next two hours learning to sit, to smile, to keep my head up. I tended to get nervous at times, and although I was friendly, I liked my own space. However, Effie told me that that wouldn't do, I was to appear outwards and welcoming and friendly at all times. By lunchtime, my jaw was aching, my feet were killing me and my cheek muscles were frozen stiff from having to practise smiling so much. I was glad to find only soft foods at lunch. Those purple melons I enjoyed so much, the lamb and plum stew and wild grain, chocolate cake. I was also glad that Peeta wasn't joining me for lunch. I don't think I had anything to say to him at that point.

After lunch I was collected by Haymitch, and thankful he didn't want me to dress up. My feet were still hurting. We sat in a couple of big, comfy armchairs, opposite each other and he sat staring at me for a few moments.

"What are we going to do?" he asked me. "How should we present you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked back.

"Well, are you going to be charming, aloof, level headed?" I didn't know what to answer, my head was still up in the air about this whole Peeta thing, and I was trying to focus on not being killed in two days time. We spent the next couple of hours discussing how I would do this, and techniques for if I become nervous, or get stage fright. I went to bed that night with a headache (and jaw ache) from everything I had practised and gone over today with Effie and Haymitch. That night was filled with fitful dreams, the most prominent of which was me, on stage with Caesar, his bright blue hair taking half the spotlight, my brother and Peeta stood with me. The audience were cheering me on, as I looked down and realised I had the biggest, sharpest knife blade I had ever seen in my hand. It slowly d awned me that I was meant to kill them.

"Who will it be?" laughed Caesar, in his infamous chuckle. My eyes widened as I looked from Gale, to Peeta, then to the knife, and I realised he meant who was I going to choose to kill. Choose between Peeta and Gale? I couldn't do it. The audience were egging me on, Caesar was stood next to me, encouraging me to choose, but before I could open my mouth to say anything, I woke up, drenched in sweat and screaming. I threw my legs over the side of the bed, and felt the soft carpet between my toes. Staggering to the bathroom, I splashed some cold water over my face and went into the living room, turning the TV on. Repeats of the reapings from a few days ago were being played. I looked at the time, and was only half surprised to see it was 4am. I guess I must have dozed off after a while, because I was woken a few hours later by Effie, who had
panicked when she saw my bedroom door open and my bed cold and empty. "I had a nightmare," I told her, scratching my head and messing my hair up even more. She helped me up, and after having a shower, I came out of my room to find my prep team sat on the sofa I hadn't long woken up on, grinning like wildcats at me. My training days are over, this day is for Cinna. I let Flavius and Octavia work on me until late afternoon, only stopping for lunch. By the time they've finished, my skin is glowing like smooth satin, my nails have been touched up with the file and a flame has been delicately painted on each of my ten fingernails and ten toenails. At half past four, Venia starts working on my hair, and by the time she is done, it feels like silk. By the time Cinna came into my room, I was starting to get nervous again. I would usually bite my nails at a time like this, but my team had worked so hard on them, and they looked so pretty, than I didn't want to touch them. Cinna was carrying what looked like a large sheet, but it was my dress.

"Close your eyes," he said. I hesitated for half a second, but he stepped up to me. "Cora, trust me, it will be fine." As they pulled the dress over my head, I could feel the chiffon slide gently down my legs. "Now step up," Cinna ordered me, and I felt him put my shoes on. When he was finished, he told me to open my eyes. I did so, and gasped. Who was this beautiful creature in the mirror, she certainly didn't look like me. My sleeveless dress made me look as though I was fire itself. The neckline was quite high, coming to a curve just above my collarbone. It covered me in a burnt orange satin, sitting on my hips and flowing out a little down to the floor. The chiffon was ruched at my right hip, with a peach coloured sash sitting across my hips, wider on my left. The crystal detailing on my right hip, looking as though it were holding up the sash. The skirt had to be my favourite part of the entire dress though. The chiffon floated out so lightly, so elegantly. As I turned in the mirror, I couldn't help but admire Cinna's talents. The bright yellow at the bottom, like a dandelion, faded up into gold then finally up into the peach of the sash. My shoes set the outfit off perfectly. They were silver, with a four inch heel, much shorter than the ones Effie had me practise in. The ankle cuffs, complete with double buckles and crystals studded into the material, looked amazing, and my toes, peeping out from the end, with their little flames on, looked like someone else's feet. I wanted to cry, but my make up was too perfect. Flavius had swept gold and copper over my eyelids, with a shimmery brown topping it off, plenty of mascara and fake eyelashes, nude coloured lips, with a bronzer dusted lightly over my skin gave it that finishing touch.

"Right you two," Haymitch said, as we were leaving the penthouse, "you are still happy and united, so act like it." I looked at Peeta and I felt a pang. I wanted to be mad at him, but I couldn't. On the other hand, I was glad to see we weren't dressed the same tonight. He was in a black suit, with little flame accents all over it, and a red shirt. He looked amazing.

"You look beautiful," he said, his eyes lighting up the way they did the night of my birthday. The interviews would be taking place on a large stage constructed, as it was every year, outside the Training Centre. It was summer so it was still quite warm in the evenings, and still light. Nothing's started yet, Caesar isn't even on stage, but my heart quickened as I step onto the stage behind Thresh - the boy from District 11 - and make my way to my seat. A raised platform had been constructed to the right of the stage, for the mentors and stylists to sit, a balcony to the left had been set up for the Gamemakers, and every single other balcony had been taken up by tv crews. But the City Circle, and all the avenues surrounding it, were completely packed with people. Standing room only. All across Panem tonight, tvs were on in every home and community hall. This was it, the night before the Games started and despite it being mandatory watching, everyone across the country wanted to see what the tributes would be like face to face with their favourite Master of Ceremonies. This would determine final bookies odds, and various other odds that they liked to put on. There will be no blackouts tonight. The Capitol will make sure of that. Caesar came on stage at the right moment, bringing with him the energy and exuberance of a much younger man than he had to be, but not even faltering once. The crowd went wild, cheering and applauding. I had to admit, it was deafening, but reassuring at the same time. I watched, as one by one, each tribute from all the eleven districts before me had their five minutes with Caesar Flickerman. Some, like the Careers, were cocky, arrogant. But then others like the girl
from 5, who was sly and elusive. Everyone had their angle, including Thresh, who played the
depth, solitary, one-word answer kind of guy. I looked out at the audience and saw Haymitch sat
with Willow, the mentor from District 7 who we met after the Tributes Parade the other day. I saw
Cinna, in front of them, but not even seeing his smile could stop the nerves right now. All too
suddenly, I was being called up, and I was grateful that I wasn't wearing Effie's shoes because I
was sure I was visibly trembling.
"Cordelia Hawthorne, District Twelve!" Caesar cried in to the microphone, and I knew that was
my cue to step up on stage with him, in front of millions of viewers. The bright lights blinded me,
and for a moment all I could hear was my own heart beat, but Caesar was every bit as charming as
they said he would be.
"Welcome, Cordelia," he said. "Although, I hear you prefer to be called by another name. Am I
right?"
"Yes," I said, smiling. "Everyone back home in Twelve calls me Cora."
"Then Cora I shall call you," he smiled. Wow, were his teeth really that dazzling white? "Now,
let's talk about your score shall we Cora? An eleven. I don't think we've seen that for a very long
time. Can you tell us about it?" I looked over at the Gamemakers balcony, where the man who fell
into the punch sat forward and shook his head.
"Sorry Caesar, I'm not allowed to talk about it. Maybe another time," I grinned cheekily.
"Ooh I like her!" he laughed.
"So Cora, what has impressed you most about the Capitol since you've been here?" Caesar
asking, his eyes bright and shining.
"I'd have to say the lamb stew," I say, after a few seconds, trying to rack my brain for something,
anything.
"The one with the dried plums? Mmm I'd have to agree, that's one of my favourites too," he said.
"The Tributes Parade then. When you came out from under that archway, my heart literally
stopped."
"Mine too," I said, thankful this was going much smoother than I had worried about,
"What was going through your mind at that point?"
"I was just hoping I wasn't going to burn to death." The crowd roared with laughter. This is easy,
I thought.
"Were the flames real?" he asked, and I swore I heard the crowd take in a collective breath as they
waited, baited, for my answer.
"Yes, they were!" I said, smiling as I saw Cinna beam at me.
"Do you have them here tonight?" Caesar asked, looking a little worried.
"No I don't, but don't worry, they are perfectly safe."
"Well at least you won't burn up before you get to the arena," he joked. "But I must say, even
with out them, your stylist has done something amazing tonight. You look like a walking flame in
that dress!"
"Thankyou," I manage to get out. Then all too sudden, my time is up, and Caesar is holding my
hand in the air.
"Cora Hawthorne, the girl on fire, everyone!" he cried once more into his microphone. The crowd
were still cheering, applauding, and going wild after I had sat down. "And finally, from District
Twelve," he said as they calmed down from his gentle command, "Peeta Mellark." I watched
Peeta as he made his way up to the front of the stage.
"So Peeta," Cesas said, as they sat down on the plush seats, "how have you been finding the
Capitol? And don't say with a map!"
"Well," thought Peeta, "there's alot of differences here."
"Oh, such as?"
"The showers are different."
"The showers are different," Caesar replied, facing the audience, "we have different showers
here."
"Tell me," Peeta said, turning to face the Master of Ceremonies, "do I smell of roses?" He got
Caesar to smell him, then Caesar asked him to return the favour, causing the crowd to go wild.
"Mmm, you smell nice. Better than me, anyway!"
"Well that's because I've lived here longer," grinned Caesar. That was Peeta. Not matter how shy he was, or appeared to be, he always knew how to play up to a crowd, or in this case, the cameras.
"Now Peeta, tell me. Is there a special lady waiting back at home for you? Handsome guy like you, the ladies must be queuing up to get at you," asked Caesar. Peeta's eyes went down to his shoes.
"No," he said, shaking his head, and blushing a little.
"Aww come on."
"Ok, well there is this one girl, who I've had a crush on for ever, but I don't think she recognised me till the Reaping." Oh great, so not content with kissing me, then spending the last two days ignoring me, he is now declaring to the whole of Panem, his childhood crush to Katniss Everdeen. "Well I tell you what you can do. You win this thing, and when you go home, she'll have to go out with you, right folks?!" The crowd, once again, clapped and cheered. But Peeta, as ever, was cool, calm and collected.
"Thanks Caesar, but I don't think that'll help me in this case."
"Oh? Why ever not?" Caesar asked, curiously.
"Because she came here with me."
For a moment, the cameras focused on Peetas downcast face, then when I looked up I can see my face plastered all over Panem. My mouth was half open in a mixture of surprise and protest, magnified on every screen as I realised Me! He means me! I pressed my lips together and stared at the floor, praying that no-one could see my cheeks flush.

"Oh, that is a real piece of bad luck," Caesar said, the pain in his voice evident. The crowd murmured in agreement, and some even cried out in agonised cries.

"Yeah, it's not great," agreed Peeta, still looking down at his shoes.

"Well I don't think any of us can blame you," Caesar said. "It'd be hard not to fall for that young lady. She didn't know?"

"Not until now," said Peeta. I allowed my eyes to flicker up to the screen just long enough to see the furious flush of my cheeks.

"Wouldn't you like to get her out here and get her response?" Caesar yelled, enthusiastically. The crowd cheered in agreement. "Well I'm sorry, but rules are rules," he replied, his finger on his ear, obviously having been told to wrap things up. "Cora Hawthorne's time has been spent. Well, best of luck to you, Peeta Mellark, and I think I speak for all of Panem when I say our hearts go with yours."

Oh my god, Gale. What on earth would he think? But then I remember that he doesn't know what has happened between Peeta and I over the last few days. Like anyone else in Panem, he would see this as just a boy finding out his love too late. My next thought is a simple one. I'm going to kill him. He came and sat back down next to me, as Caesar finished up what he was saying, then we all stood as the National Anthem was played. I had to look up, out of required respect, and as I did, I saw every screen in Panem was covered in mine and Peeta's faces, just inches apart, blushing furiously.

After the anthem had finished and the lights have gone out, we all filed back to the elevators and I made sure not to get into one that contained Peeta. He got to the penthouse before I did, and as soon as I came out through the doors, I threw myself at him. The palms of my hands hit his chest and he went flying back into this big, ugly urn filled with fake flowers. The urn shattered in to a million pieces and Peeta's hands began to flow blood where he had cut them.

"What the hell was that for?" he cried, the hurt in his eyes immediate.

"You had no right to do that," I yelled back. "You kiss me, and tell me that you have wanted to be with me for a while and then you ignore me for two days straight. Then you go live on air and tell them whole of Panem that you are in love with me." The tears were starting to fall down my cheeks, my make up was running like mad, but I didn't care. "You used me, and I can never forgive you for that." Haymitch, Cinna, Effie, and Portia walked in at that point and Effie screamed.

"What happened?" Cinna asked. "Did you fall over?"

"Yeah, but only after she shoved me," Peeta snapped, as Effie and Haymitch helped him to stand up.

"Shoved him?" Haymitch asked.

"This was your idea, wasn't it?" I snarled, turning on Haymitch. I had had enough at this point.

"Getting him to use me, turn me into a fool in front of the entire country."

"It was my idea," winced Peeta, as he pulled spikes of pottery out from his hands. "Haymitch just helped me with it."

"Oh yeah because Haymitch is so helpful - to you," I retorted.

"You are a fool," snaps Haymitch, "he hasn't done you any harm, in fact he has probably done you some good."

"He made me look weak."

"He made you look desirable. And right now sweetheart, that's probably the best thing he could have done for you. Now everyone will be talking about the star crossed lovers from Twelve."
"But we're not star crossed," I cried, "we never have been. He's been in love with Katniss for as long anyone can remember."
"It's a television show," he snaps.
"He's right, Cora," said Cinna, calmly. This stops me in my tracks.
"I should have been told, so I didn't look so stupid," I said, heavily.
"No, your reaction was perfect," Portia told me. "If you knew, your face wouldn't have read as real."
"She's just worried about her boyfriend," Peeta said, gruffly. Boyfriend? I don't have a boyfriend. Peeta was the only one I ever liked. The only one I ever wanted to be with.
"I can't do this anymore," I sighed, and shoved everyone off me, storming off to my room and slamming the door shut. I lay face first on the bed for a while and let my tears fall. I wasn't one to go gooey over a guy, but I felt humiliated, even more so because of the way I reacted. After about an hour or so, Cinna knocked on my door, gently.
"Go away," I said dully, my voice muffled by the pillow that my face was pressed into.
"Cora, I'm coming in," Cinna said, his voice soft and soothing, as it always was. I sighed and stood up, walked over to the door and unlocked it. I stepped back and Cinna opened it slowly, as though I were a deer in the forest and he didn't want to scare me off.
"Cora, are you ok?" he asked, despite the evidence I clearly wasn't. "What happened?"
"I don't know," I sighed, sitting down on the bed. "I guess I just got mad. I let my emotions get in the way. God I feel so stupid." Cinna let me rant and rave for the next fifteen minutes, and when I had calmed down, with my face in my hands, he sat down next to me and wrapped his arm around my shoulder.
"Let's get you cleaned up, and then we'll go and have dinner," he said gently. He called for one of the Avoxes to come and help me, because he know I was in an absolute state. A young girl with jet black hair came to my aide. She had bright blue eyes that once held a sparkle, but I could tell being here, as a Capitol prisoner, had dulled them. She had the slight look of District 7 about her, but I couldn't be sure. She helped me undress and then I had a quick shower, while she tidied away my clothes. I found a simple outfit of a sleeveless, ruby-red, satin shirt, and light blue, cotton trousers. The girl helped me with my shoes, because she was told to help and I was still feeling a little numb inside, then she brushed my hair, smiling a little, as if she remembered something from long ago, maybe a little sister, and braided it for me, the way I had braided it the other night, so it fell down my right side.
As I walked cautiously out to the dining room, I saw everyone was already at the table, eating. I took the chair furthest away from Peeta. The sight of his heavily bandaged hands stabbed me in the chest, with a huge pang of guilt.
I tossed and turned in bed that night, unable to sleep. By 11 o'clock, I still hadn't drifted off, so I decided to go up to the roof for a bit of fresh air. Peeta was already up there when I turned the corner to the garden up there. The lights were off up there at nights, and I saw his silhouette sat on one of the benches as I walked up behind him.
"Oh, it's you," he said, bitterly.
"Peeta," I said, sitting down next to him, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have exploded like that."
"No you shouldn't have," he snapped. His shoulders sagged, and he turned to me. "But thankyou for apologising." I took his hands in mine and examined them.
"Will they be ok?"
"Yeah, Portia says there's no real damage done."
"Good," I said, squeezing his hand a little.
"Cora, you know I meant what I said. To Caesar tonight, about you." He moved in closer to me and I rested my head on his shoulders. Feeling him press his lips against the top of my head, and breathe in deep, I turned to face him.
"Peeta," I started, but he shushed me and bent his head down towards mine. He kissed me softly at first, sending shivers all down my spine, then as he moved his hands up to cup my face, I moved right in to him, our bodies leaving no space between us. I could feel his heart beating wildly against my chest, and I'm pretty sure he could hear mine thumping loudly in my throat.
After dinner, I had unbraided my hair, but tied it back loosely when I came up to the roof. Peeta stared deep into my eyes and pulled my hair band out, which was only just holding up my thick wavy black hair, causing it to then fall into loose curls over my shoulders and down my back. I saw him take a deep sigh and a huge smile crept across his face, lighting up those beautiful eyes of his. I couldn't help but smile myself, he really got to me, but this time in a good way. I lifted my hand up and gently ran my fingers through his blond locks, and smiled as he closed his eyes and moved his head into my hand. A small moan escaped his lips so I leaned forward and gently pressed my lips onto his. He tried to move into me, but I wouldn't let him, teasing him with butterfly kisses, and my nails running along his head. He responded by grinning and pulling my hips up and on top of his, so I was straddling him. As I kissed him deeply, and passionately, I knew this was everything I'd ever wanted. Peeta's hands were stroking up and down my back, while my arms were snaked around his neck. We stopped kissing and just looked deep into each other's eyes for a moment, then I lay my head down on his shoulder, nuzzling into his shoulder, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist. I don't think either of us wanted to move from that spot. We wanted to stay like that forever. But we knew we couldn't. We knew that tomorrow morning we would be going into an arena where one - if not both - of us would be killed. I don't know how long we were up there for, but Haymitch came up to get us after a while, saying we needed our sleep. I clung onto Peeta's hand until we got to our bedrooms.

"Night," I said to Peeta.

"See you tomorrow Cora," Peeta replied, kissing me on the cheek, and heading into his own room.
Chapter 10

I have no idea how I was able to sleep that night, but I seemed to be out as soon as my head hit the pillow. I woke up at about 5am, and was mildly surprised to see I was still wearing what I had been in yesterday evening. I pulled the crumpled clothes off and climbed into the shower, letting the hot water run over me, as I realised that today could well be my last day I would ever see. I dressed in something simple this morning, because I knew I would ultimately get changed once we got to the arena. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, and it still being so early, I braided my hair back, so it hung down my right side, then went to sit on the sofa for a while, waiting for Cinna. Peeta came and sat down next to me a few minutes later. My stomach was churning, and it had nothing to do with him. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and I curled into him, not wanting today to happen. I knew what I had to do though, and I turned to face him.

"Cora, before you say anything, I just wanted to say I'm sorry I never said anything back home, in Twelve. I should have told you sooner how I felt."

"Peeta, I - I need to talk to you." This was the hardest thing I had ever had to do. Ok with the possible exception of hearing my name being called out on Reaping day and having to walk up to the stage in front of all my friends and family. "I think I should do this alone. In the arena, I mean. I've thought about it, and to protect you I need to go alone. Not ally up with anyone." My heart sank as I watched his face fall. He nodded.

"Okay," he said quietly. "If that's what you want." He then stood up and walked back to his room to wait for Portia. The tears were starting to fall down my cheeks and I quickly wiped them away, knowing that this was the best thing to do. I took a deep breath, stood up and jumped as I saw Cinna stood watching me.

"Come on," he said gently, "we need to get going."

~ Peeta's POV ~

I didn't know what to think. I shut my bedroom door and waited for Portia to come and collect me, like she said she would. Cora didn't need to protect me. I should be protecting her. I knew what I had to do. She turned up about fifteen minutes later, then took me up the roof. A hovercraft appeared as though from nowhere and a thin ladder came down in front of me. I stepped onto it, and immediately, an electric current held me in place as it lifted me up into the belly of the craft. Before I was freed from the ladder, a woman in a white coat injected my fore arm.

"What's that?"

"It's your tracker, Peeta," she said. "So the Gamemakers know where you are in the arena at all times." Once the tracker was in place, the current was turned off, and I sat down, waiting for the ladder to come back up with Portia attached.

~ Cora's POV ~

I scratched my arm where the woman had just injected my tracker. I may have been frozen to the ladder, but it still didn't stop it from stinging as she poked the needle into my skin. Cinna arrived on the hovercraft moments later, and a young Avox boy, about my age possibly, lead us to a room where breakfast was waiting. I knew this would be my last proper meal for a while - if I wasn't killed in the initial bloodbath of course - so I just ate whatever was put in front of me, no matter how much was there. I don't think I even bothered to chew this time. I was only on the craft for about half an hour, before they darkened the windows and lowered the blinds so I couldn't see where we were. I guessed we were coming up to the arena then. When we've landed, the ladder descends for us again, only this time, we are led down into a tube which I find out takes us right down into the catacombs of this year's arena. I followed Cinna through the winding corridors and twisted stairways, til we reached my very own Launch Room. In the districts, we call this the Stockyard - the place the animals go to before they are slaughtered. I'm the first - and last - tribute to have used this room. At the end of each Games, the arenas are usually preserved, and used as tourist spots for Capitol residents. They can tour the catacombs, stay in the arena itself for a month,
even take part in re-enacting the killings. It's disgusting.
I tried to keep my breakfast down as I had a quick shower and brushed my teeth. I knew eating so much would come back to bite me in the butt, but on the other hand, I didn't know when my next meal would be.
I watched Cinna as he opened the closet in the room. His green and gold flecked eyes taking in every detail of the outfit I was given. When he lifted it out and brought it over to me I saw it was quite lightweight, but durable. That meant I would probably be in the woods or something similar. That was good. It meant shelter, water, food. I dressed in the clothes he got out for me. He has had no say in this outfit - this was all the Gamemakers, as they were the only ones who really knew what the area would hold for me and the twenty-three other tributes. On top of the undergarments that were given to me, I put on simple tawny trousers, a light green blouse, a sturdy brown belt, and a thin, hooded black jacket which fell to my thighs.
"Why is the inside silver?" I asked.
"It's designed to reflect body heat," said Cinna, "so be prepared for some very cool nights." I rolled my skintight socks on and picked up the boots, examining them. They were so much better than I could have ever hoped for. I ran my fingers along the soft leather, smiling a little. The soles were narrow and flexible with treads, so that would be good for when I needed to run. I sat down on the chair next to me, while Cinna braided my hair for me, down my side, how I had it last night for dinner. When he had finished, he came to sit in front of me and slid his hand out to me.
"What's this?" I asked.
"Just look," he said, softly. I picked up the little gold circle he was holding out to me and gasped as I realised it was the mockingjay pin that Primrose had given me back in Twelve.
"Thankyou," I breathed, "where did you find it?"
"I got it from the clothes you wore when you arrived in the Capitol. I thought it might hold some meaning to you." He wasn't wring. It may not have been mine to start with, but it was about the only thing I had left of my district.
"Thankyou," I said again, trying to push back the tears that were threatening to fall. As he pinned the badge onto the inside of my jacket, it suddenly hit me the enormity of what the Capitol were asking me to do. I began shaking, but a voice above us called out.
"Thirty seconds till launch." I looked over at the large glass tube that I had been trying all morning to ignore. Cinna wrapped his arms round me and I fell into the, grateful for the last piece of human attention for, well possibly the last time.
"I'm not allowed to bet," he said quietly, "but if I were, I'd put all my money on you."
"Thankyou Cinna," I said, shakily. "For everything, thankyou." He nodded, a sad, little smile on his face.
"Remember what Haymitch said. Run, find water. The rest will follow."
"Ten seconds to launch."
"Good luck, Girl on Fire," he said, as I stepped into the tube and onto the metal plate. It closed behind me and I turned round to face him. It slowly lifted me up for maybe fifteen seconds and suddenly, there was sunlight. Sunlight and a breeze. And a voice overhead boomed out from all directions.
"Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Seventy Fourth Hunger Games begin!"

"Sixty seconds," boomed the voice once more, and as I looked in front of me, I saw the Cornucopia, with a large countdown on the top, counting down the seconds until I was to begin killing. I had fifty seconds now, fifty seconds to take in my surroundings. In front of the Cornucopia were all kinds of weapons and minimal survival equipment. The juiciest prizes were sat right in the mouth of the Cornucopia, the bow and arrow, the spears, the swords and knives. The further out it went, the less desirable items became. The closest ones to me were plastic sheeting. That wouldn't be useful to most people, but I knew I could use that for shelter, for warmth. That's when I spotted the rucksack. A niggling feeling on the back of my neck caused to me turn around and that was when I saw Peeta, stood on his metal plate. He must have been watching me, because he was very softly shaking his head. He was telling me no. I know he wanted me to run, just like Haymitch said, but no, I didn't ca....
"Well it looks as though we have a very good mix this year, things could get very interesting," Caesar Flickerman was saying to Claudius Templesmith, as I sat in front of the television, watching the start of the Hunger Games. I didn't want to, but it was mandatory viewing, and I wanted to make sure Cora was alright. What was I saying, of course she wouldn't be alright, she was stuck in a closed arena with twenty three other kids, all of whom were trying to kill each other so they could be the one to come home and live. School had been closed for the day again, so that we could watch the opening of the Games. There were the bookies odds for each tribute, a little about the districts they came from, and the reapings were played again, with Caesar and Claudius analysing once more how they think each tribute would fare in the arena from the reapings, with the added knowledge of their scores. The only thing they didn't know was what happened with each private session with the Gamemakers. No-one ever knew, as it wasn't allowed to be public knowledge. Probably in case someone embarrassed them by - oh god, I really hope Cora didn't do anything stupid like throw a knife at them. I knew what her temper could be like. She had quite a long fuse, but I would never recommend to anyone being around when it would finally blow.

"Kayle, Kayle, Kaaayyyyyyle." I sighed and got out of my chair. Posy needed my help with something. Going into her room, I stopped in my tracks, and had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing. Posy had gotten into Cora's closet and was now sporting a bra (which she had stuffed with socks), and Cora's favourite top, along with my hunting boots.

"Oh sweetie, don't you look pretty, but should we get you changed?"
"No," my little sister cried, stomping her foot on the floor, which proved a lot harder than she thought, seeing as her 5 year old feet were much much smaller than my 17 year old feet.
"Ok, but can we at least take the bra off of you? I don't think Cora would want you playing with that." She sighed and pouted, then thought for a moment.
"Alright, but only because you asked me nicely, Kayle," she said. "Help me?" she asked, lifting her arms up. Once my little sister was back to being braless (I never thought I would have to say those words), I took her into the kitchen to get something to eat. Vick and Rory were already there, eating lunch, while mum was stood at the side, folding Mrs Gordon's laundry. Once Posy was happily munching on cinnamon and raisin bread, fresh this morning, and a rabbit leg, I went back to the television.

"District Eleven, Rue Kennedy," Caesar said. Her little face filled the screen. She was the same age as Primrose, she was too little to be going into that arena. "She is going into the arena today with odds of 60-1."

"District Twelve, Peeta Mellark, with odds of 35-1. And finally from District Twelve, Cordelia Hawthorne, the Girl on Fire, with odds of 5-1." Five to one, it was usually the Careers who got those odds. She must have done something very impressive to be given that. Suddenly the screen changed from Caesar and Claudius, to a meadow, surrounded by trees, and a large horn in the middle.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Seventy Fourth Hunger Games begin!" The screen panned round and suddenly my sister's face was right in front of me. She looked much healthier than when she had left, her cheeks weren't as hollow. Not that they were, we ate better than some of the families in the Seam, but we still struggled. The sixty second countdown began and that was when we got to see the arena for the first time properly. If any of the tributes stepped off their metal plates before the countdown ended, they would be blown to pieces. I watched one girl step off hers two seconds early one year. They had very little left to send back to her parents.

"Five, four, three, two, one." DONG. This year's Hunger Games had begun.
DONG!
That was the gong. My sixty seconds were up, and thanks to Peeta, I'd stayed a split second too long deciding what to do and they were now ahead of me. I scanned the field quickly and my eyes landed on the rucksack I had been eyeing up seconds before. I leapt off the metal plate and ran faster than I had ever run before towards my prize. I also grabbed a loaf of bread that was sitting near by. A boy, I think he was from District Nine, tried to grapple it off of me, but before he could get a good grip, I was sprayed with blood from his mouth. As he slumped to the floor at my feet, I saw the knife in his back. My instincts told me to get out of there, which is good because seconds later, the girl from Two, I think her name was Clove, had thrown a knife at me. I pulled the rucksack up over my face instinctively, and the knife jammed right in to the front. As I sat there on the grass, trying to process what had just happened, I watched her snarl at me, then run off. I wasn't going to take any more chances, so I took my rucksack, bread, a sheet of plastic I had managed to retrieve, and my new knife, and ran into the woods. I wanted to get as far away from them all as I possibly could. Try and find water, that had been Haymitch's advice. Well, I'd ignored the first part, so I figured I may aswell do as he says. As I turned a corner, trying to get away from the bloodbath, I crashed face first into someone and we both fell to the floor. Standing up to protect myself, I saw it was the sharp looking girl from Five, who I'd named FoxFace. I think I heard Caesar call her Jade. I preferred the name Foxface, it suited her. She looked terrified, trembling, eyes wide open, the corners of her mouth were turned down in terror. I wasn't surprised, I wasn't exactly feeling the love right now. I jutted out at her slightly to scare her off, and it worked. She scrambled up on to her feet and almost fell back over again as she ran off. I turned in the opposite direction and ran as fast as I could, as far as my feet could take me. For the next few hours, I kept going, but jogged at a much slower pace, so I didn't wear myself out too fast. Just after noon - I could tell, the sun was high in the sky - I found an alcove in the bottom of a large tree root. A rabbit hopped past me, making me jump and brandish the knife it's way. "Oh it's just you," I sighed, realising that if there was one rabbit, there would be hundreds more to snare, which meant food. And water. The rabbits needed to drink, so maybe there was water near by. I tore a small chunk of bread from the loaf, and set it to one side, being careful to keep my eye out for other tributes. I was so far in though, that I didn't think anyone else would be this way. Upon opening the rucksack, I had, along with the plastic sheeting, a thin black sleeping bag which will reflect body heat, a pack of crackers, a bottle of iodine [which I remembered from training would come in handy for cleaning stream water to drink], a box of wooden matches, a small coil of wire, a pair of sunglasses and a two litre plastic bottle with a cap, which when I tip it upside down, I discover is bone dry.
I sunk back into the curve of the root, sighing. There had to be a way of getting water somehow. These trees wouldn't be here otherwise, nor would the animals. I had walked so much today, and felt really uncomfortable as the valleys brought me lower and lower. I wished I could be up on the hills, like in Twelve, where I felt safer. I could look out for my enemies easier then. I made a mental note to myself, as I packed everything up, to camouflage the bright orange colour covering the rucksack. That wasn't going to do me any favours. I walked and walked through the forest, coming to groups of trees I recognised and a few I didn't. I really felt my thirst now. My throat was dry, my lips were cracked and my head was pounding. A horrible thought crossed my mind - what if the only source of water was the lake by the Cornucopia. It would be heavily guarded by the Careers now, there was no doubt about that. I silently prayed, however, that there were other water sources, because the lake was now a full days journey away. I continued on my way, grateful that the pine needles on the floor softened and muffled my footsteps as I walked. My mind drifted to Peeta as I slowly ambled along - it was getting harder to walk dehydrated but I had to keep going. I saw him in my mind dead already. Drained of all his blood by one of the Careers, his lifeless body - ok I can't think like that. I was feeling hungry again, but didn't want to break
into any rations again, so I used the knife to peel off some pine bark. Not the other outer layers, but the inner layers were edible. It was hard to eat after a week of gourmet food, but I'd had it before, I'd had worse, so I could do it now. When I came across a group of willows, I decided it would be a good idea to settle here for the night. I easily scaled the biggest of the trees, and made my bunk for the night. It was only twelve feet off the ground, but it was better than trying to hide in a bush somewhere. Sliding into the thin sleeping bag, carefully, I tied my belt around me and the branch, then back around me again, just in case I roll over in my sleep. The rucksack went into the sleeping bag with me and I pulled the black hood over my head, then settled in, attempting to get a few hours shut eye. Before I could get too comfy, the sound of the National Anthem blaring out of the sky made me jump. I was just glad I had tied the belt around me. I watched the seal of Panem appear in the dark sky above my head, then the headshots of the tributes who died today. At home, we would see the recaps of each killing as the tribute was being remembered. In the arena, we only saw the headshots of the dead tributes. This was in case a secret skill could given away by accident to the rest of us. They didn't want any of us to have an advantage. As the first faces appeared in the sky, I ticked them one by one in my head. There was the girl from District Three. That meant the Careers from One and Two had survived. Her dark haired picture disappeared and in it's place came the young boy from Four with the blonde curly locks. He was probably only about 13, not much older than Primrose and Rue. That came as a mild shock to me, usually the Careers make it at least through the first day, but looking at him, he was so small, that I guess it wasn't too much of a surprise. Next came the boy from Five and both tributes from Six. When both tributes from Seven came up, I felt a mild jolt of sadness. Obviously that meant that there were two less in competition now, but I had met with their mentor, Willow Monroe. If she was a friend of Haymitch, she was a friend of mine. The boy from Eight and both from Nine. I ticked them all off in my head, and there was one missing (from the cannons I had heard earlier this afternoon). I was just thinking about Peeta when the final image came into view. No, it was the girl from Ten. So Peeta was still alive. That was good.

I don't know what time it was, but a crackling noise woke me from my sleep. I sat up and carefully looked around, instantly spotting the fire lit by another tribute. "Idiot," I thought, shaking my head and rolling my eyes. That was when I heard it - the distinct whirring of a camera, right by my head. I looked into the branch and realised there was one built into the knot of the trunk, watching my every move. I was about to close my eyes again when I heard the crashing of footsteps. Whoever it was, wasn't bothering to hide the fact they were coming. And it sounded like a lot of someones. Four, maybe five of them. I realised that the risk I took in grabbing the rucksack was worth it. I'm warm, but I'm assuming that whoever has lit the fire won't be warm.

The footsteps stopped and I heard a piercing scream and someone laughing. That's another one down, I think sadly, but I'm surprised I haven't heard the cannon yet, signalling the death.

"Are you sure she's dead?" a voice said, underneath me. I didn't dare move, let alone breath.
"Course she is, I did her myself," said another
"I'll go and check," said a third, which made my blood chill. It was Peeta. Very slowly, I peeked out of the tiny gap in my sleeping bag, I had to confirm it. Yes, I was right. Peeta had joined up with the Careers. Bastard. Absolute bastard. This was because I said I wanted to be alone, now he has teamed up with them to help them kill me. He knows me better than anyone, at least in the arena.

"Why don't we just finish him off," the first voice said, when Peeta went to check the tribute they had just killed.
"No, we'll keep Lover Boy safe for a little while longer, he's good with a knife and he can help us find her," said the second voice. So they were using him to get to me, but did he know that? Urgh, I was so pissed off with Peeta, but because of the camera right next to my face, I didn't let it show. I stayed as still as I could, hardly daring to breathe. BOOM! That was the cannon telling us whoever it was, was now dead.

"Now she's dead," said Peeta, right underneath me. "Come on, I think she's gone this way." He led them away from me, further into the woods. I sat back into the trunk, wondering if the dead girl was Rue. Then I dismissed that idea; she was too clever to be lighting fires like that in the
middle of the night. I peered over the edge again, and caught a glimpse of Peeta's face in the
torchlight. His face was swollen, with what looked like the forming of a black eye coming, his
arm must have been bleeding at some point because there was a hashed up bandage wrapped
around it, blood still seeping gently onto the outside of it, and he was limping, by the sound of his
footsteps moving away. They must have beaten him up pretty bad, but I'm guessing the fact he
was willing to hand me to them on a plate was tempting enough for them not to actually kill him.
Yet.
"Do you think anyone bought that soppy romance crap?"
"She might have. She seemed pretty simple to me. Every time I think of her grinning like a child
in that dress, makes me want to puke."
"Wish we knew how she got that eleven." Ha that was Cato. I knew he would be pissed that I
scored higher than him, although when we came face to face, I doubt I would be laughing.
"Bet you Lover Boy knows." I couldn't hear anymore because they had gone to far. Plus the
sound of them crashing through the trees was covering up their voices. Honestly, if they did that
when out hunting in the wild, they would starve in a week. If that.
Above me, the birds fell silent and one high pitched note was sounded out, followed by the
humming of a hovercraft engine. I watched as it picked up the dead girl, from by the dying embers
of her fire, her downfall, and then it disappeared. The birds resumed chirping away once it was
out of the way. These weren't normal birds, the ones who slept at night and sang in the day. I
didn't know what these were but if they were here in the arena, they were here for a reason.
Which didn't bode well for me.
"Move," I told myself. I was so stiff and dehydrated that I had to give myself physical commands
before I was able to do anything. Kick my brain in to gear in a sense. I wriggled out of my
sleeping bag, rolled it up and tucked it into my rucksack, then taking a deep breath, I jump out of
the tree and land softly on the pine needles, crouching. Being hidden in the tree, behind the willow
leaves, tucked into my sleeping bag, I doubt I was easy for the camera to pick up. Even the one
right next to me. Now I can guarantee that I will be on close up in every single home in Panem.
The audience would want to know how I'm going to react to the news that Peeta has betrayed me,
after s publicly declaring his love for me. It's not much, but I subtly raise my head up to the sky
and give a knowing smile. There, that should keep them talking for a bit longer.
Before I left the area, I remembered the snares I had set up before settling in for the night. It's something Gale and Katniss taught me. Two of them were still empty, but the third had a nice fat rabbit hanging from it. Perfect! In no time, I'd skinned it, cleaned it and gutted it. That should show some of the sponsors out there how good I am, I thought. Once I've finished, I leave the skin and innards, along with the head, feet and tail, under a large pile of leaves. I packed the fresh meat away in my bag, and made my way away from where the Careers and Peeta had headed. I thought about how much I would love to light a fire and eat this meat, but remembered how ill Gale had been after eating raw rabbit one day. He was in bed for a week, throwing up anything that came into contact with his lips. That was when I remembered the dying girl, and her fire. The flames were out, but the embers should still be hot enough. I rushed over to her camp, and sure enough, I was right. I fashioned a spit out of some branches, cut the meat up with the knife and set it over the ashes, the heat slowly cooking the meat through until it was safe to eat. While the rabbit was cooking, I started to camouflage the orange on my rucksack by rubbing ashes from the fire on to it with the charred end of a stick. It wasn't a great change, but it was darker than it had been. Mud would help darken it much better though, but I'd need water for that, I realised, and I was still yet to come across any.

Once the rabbit was done, I wrapped half of it in plastic, stowing it away in my bag for later, kicked dirt over the remains of the embers and headed off in the opposite direction to the Careers and Peeta, eating the other half of the rabbit on the way. I'm glad the rabbit is as greasy as it is, because it isn't going down too badly considering how dry my mouth is. I have to make finding water my priority today.

~ Gale's POV ~

I'd woken up early because my little sister wanted cuddles again. If this is what Cora usually does, she must have the patience of a saint because I'm shattered and it's only been a week. I wrapped my blanket round me and curled up on the chair in the main room with a couple of slices of dandelion bread and some of Prim's goat cheese. I flicked the television on, because I figured I was already up now, and I wanted to see how Cora was doing. She had survived the initial bloodbath yesterday thank god, but anything could happen in a few hours. The Games were covered 24 hours a day, although some of it was just highlights. Even so, I wanted to see if anything had changed between going to bed and getting up just now. Caesar Flickerman's face was back on the screen again - it must have been about 5 o'clock in the morning, I began to wonder if that guy ever slept - and he seemed excited about something. This couldn't be anything good.

"... all wanting to know is, what is she thinking? Does she know? How did she react when she found out?" Caesar was saying to Claudius Templesmith, sitting next to him. My sister's face filled the screen, from all different angles, as she walked through the woods. Found out what? Is Peeta dead?

"Let's take a look back at some of the highlights from the last couple of hours," Claudius said, and the pair turned round in their chairs to face the screen behind them. The screen showed a girl huddled around a fire. If this was a couple of hours ago, it was pretty dark. I prayed it wasn't Cora, then remembered she had much more sense than that, plus she had found a sleeping bag in that rucksack. I watched, glued to the screen, as five figures stomped up to the girl, not even bothering to hide the fact they were coming. I turned my head from the screen, wincing, as they stabbed her, kicked her, five against one. They all walked off laughing, and mimicking her.

"No, nooooooo please don't," the boy from One was saying, in a high pitched voice.

"That's a really good impression," the blonde girl from the same district laughed.

"Are you sure she's dead?" asked the girl from Two.

"Course she is, I did her myself," the boy from Two said.
"I'll go and check," said a new voice. Okay, the voice wasn't new to me. In fact that voice was very well-known to me. Peeta. Why was he with the Careers? As he walked off, his features were lit up and I gasped. His face had been beaten, his arm was bleeding, or had been very recently, and he was limping. What the hell had happened to him?

"Why don't we finish him off?" the girl from Two asked. "No, we'll keep Lover Boy safe for a little while longer, he's good with a knife and he can help us find her." I really prayed I had misheard that last sentence, but I hadn't. Peeta had offered to give them my sister in return for his safety. I felt sick, but I was glued to the screen. I wanted to see Cora, make sure she was ok, that she was still alive. The screen was now filled with Peeta limping over to the girl.

~Peeta's POV ~

I was in agony. I'm sure the left side of my face was twice as big as it had been this morning. Marvel and Cato had given a pretty big beating when I offered to team up with them. The girls, Glimmer and Clove, burst out laughing, which was when the boys jumped on me and started beating me. It had been when Cato had got his sword out that I was able to stammer out fully that I was giving them Cora. I could lead them to her, and she wouldn't suspect a thing. Of course I had only done it to protect her. I doubted the audience would see it like that though. But I couldn't worry about that now, I had to finish off this girl. I felt sick about it, but I knew it had to be done. "Please," she moaned quietly as I approached, "please just kill me." I got out my knife and stabbed her in the chest, the bile rising in my throat, but I quickly pushed it back down and limped back over to the Careers.

"Come on," I said, sounding more confident that I felt right now, "I think she went this way."

~Cora's POV ~

As I hiked along, in the sunrise, I thought about Peeta. Had he shown his true colours? Had he really just been playing me again and again? Or was there yet another layer to Peeta Mellark that I was still yet to uncover. What will the Capitol audiences be thinking right now. If I smiled every now and then, the audience might just think we cooked this plan together. You aren't the only one who can play games Peeta, I thought, smiling to myself a little as I continued my seemingly fruitless hunt for water. Was I just wasting my time? Should I be trying to head back to the lake and fight the Careers? I think back to what Katniss and Gale had taught me about water. It runs downhill, so continuing down into this valley was good. By lunchtime however, my mood is awful. My head is pounding, my mouth feels like sandpaper, and I'm barely able to concentrate on anything other than putting one foot in front of the other. If I were to be attacked now, I would be an easy target. Why is Haymitch not sending me water, I wonder. Could I have misjudged him, is he that bad of a mentor and has given up on me already, or could he even be sending me a message. By late afternoon, I no longer care. My legs give way underneath me and I just sit there in the mud, faintly swirling my finger around making patterns like I used to when I was a child. Like I do with Po... hang on, mud. I try to wake my brain up as I think about what I know about mud. Dirt and water. Water. There must be water close by, I realise. I drag myself through the mud, following the smell of pond lilies, a smell I recognised from the lake in the woods outside Twelve. Ten meters away from where I fell, I crash into the water. A pond, a beautiful pond. I resist the urge to gulp as much water as I can, and instead, fill my two-litre bottle up, and add a few drops of iodine, like the training instructor taught me. I try and wait half an hour, I mean I think it was half an hour, but I couldn't hold on any longer, before I took my first sip of water since entering the arena. I forced myself to spread it out and finished the bottle up over the next hour, repeating the process twice more before settling in for the night with a meal of rabbit, crackers, and water. By the time I am settled in a tree, the anthem is playing. Only the girl who Peeta killed filled the sky tonight. She had been from District Eight. If only I knew what Peeta was doing right now.
Drifting off to sleep, I made a mental note to spear some of those fish in that lily pond in the morning. That would be another meal sorted, along with the roots of the lilies. I was woken up a few hours later by the stench of burning and heat. I opened my eyes to see smoke everywhere, and a huge, orange wall of fire, at least ten feet tall and more than thirty feet wide, heading towards me. I unclipped my belt which was securing me and the sleeping back to the branch I was in, and landed on my feet, twisting my ankle. I didn't have time to worry about that now though, as I grabbed my rucksack and sleeping bag and ran away from the flames, trying to follow the rabbits, the deer, and even the large pack of wild dogs that sped past me, but they were too fast and soon lost me. The flames were pushing me away from my pond, my mini sanctuary where I had found a bit of peace for a little while, so I tried to run around the edge, to get behind the fire, but it was soon clear that was impossible. Tripping over a root, my sleeping bag went flying a few feet in front of me, so I scrambled as fast as I could, wincing in pain at my ankle, and I found a little alcove to hide in for a moment. Giving myself a minute to rest, I rolled my sleeping bag up, and shoved it into the rucksack, pulling out my water bottle and taking a few big sips before continuing to safety. The smoke was getting too powerful, getting deep into my lungs, causing me to throw up what little food I had eaten a few hours ago. My throat was sore. No scratch that, my throat felt as though it was filled with razor blades, I was rasping to breathe, bring up the bile that lined my stomach. I pulled my shirt up above my nose and was grateful to find it drenched in sweat. It only gave me a thin veil of protection, but it was much better than breathing the smoke directly in. Standing up, I prepared to make my way back towards the Cornucopia. I assumed that's what the Gamemakers wanted. There had been very little in the way of deaths the last day or so, so the audience would want to see some action, or they would get bored and the bookies odds would get ruined. I only just ducked in time, as I heard a whizzing behind me, and turned to see a large ball of fire flying towards my head. It exploded against the tree I had just been hiding in, and flames burst out everywhere. I jumped, ducked and weaved, thankfully missing any major injury, but a few inches of my hair was singed from the bottom and when I touched it, it felt apart, in ashes. I stared at it in horror, mixed with terror, and still some nausea, and that was when the hissing registered. Not fully until it was too late. I ducked out of the way, but the fireball skidded right across my left thigh, splitting my trouser leg open, and searing the skin apart. I tried so hard not to howl at that point, the tears rolling down my cheeks as I bit the inside of them. They must have designed this just for me, I thought bitterly. Cordelia Hawthorne, the girl on fire. How ironic it was now. I waited for another attack, but it never came. The Gamemakers had finished playing with me for now. The real sport of the game was watching us kill each other, though they would kill one of us themselves every now and then, just to show that they could. If they had stopped attacking me, it meant another tribute was near by. The smoke was so thick that I was barely able to see in front of me, let alone watch out for anyone coming for me. I wanted to climb a tree again, but I knew to stay down low as smoke rises. I staggered forward slowly, putting one foot in front of the other, slowly, wincing in pain every time my left foot touched the ground. I didn't realise I was in water, until it was just past my ankles. Dazed, I looked down to find myself standing in a small, spring-fed pool, which led out to a river. I thought back to what mum taught me growing up in the Seam. What could I remember about burns? I knew that minor burns required cold water, but for one like the burn on my leg, where the skin had split open? I would just have to chance it, I realised. I had no other option. I waded straight into the river, screaming in pain as the water touched the raw layers of skin, but at the same time, feeling relief in my hands where there burns were mild, but noticeable. As I drifted around in the cool water, I was suddenly aware of another feeling. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and as I turned around, I was met with five pairs of eyes on the other side of the river. Peeta and the Careers. They began to chase me, trying to find somewhere to cross the river, while I tried to get back on to the bank and run. I found a tall, sturdy tree and began to climb, and
by the time I was fifteen feet up, they were clamouring around the bottom. I found a solid branch twenty five feet up in the air and watched as they tried to get me. Peeta was stood to the side watching in what seemed like horror, but given the fact he had tricked me and lied to me so many times over the last week alone, I wasn't going to trust my judgement on anything right now. Adrenaline had taken over, and I couldn't feel my leg right now. The girl from One was trying to hit me with her bow and arrow, but was missing spectacularly, leaving the arrows lodged in the trunk next to me, or above me. Cato snatched it out of her hands and tried himself, but he was even worse. "Maybe you should try throwing the sword," I shouted down to them, spotting the sword in Cato's hands. I grinned as his furious face below me contorted, and he threw the bow on the ground, then tried to climb the tree to get me. I watched as he got about ten feet up, then lost his grip, and fell back down, landing hard on his back. He was about to try again, when Peeta stepped forward. "Look, why don't we just leave her there," he said, looking up at me. "Excuse me?" the girl from Two demanded, turning to square up to him, which seemed pretty funny right now, considering she was at least a head shorter than him, but made up for it by being pretty damn scary. "Well I mean, it's not like she can go anywhere," he said. "So let's just wait her out. She'll have to come down soon." Cato seemed to consider this for a moment, and then deciding it was a good idea, turned to face him. "Okay, Lover Boy, your call. We wait." The five of them then settled in for the day. By late afternoon, my left leg was burning so badly, that it felt as though the flames were back on it. I tried to pour water from my water bottle over the wound, but it did nothing. "Haymitch please," I plead, tears in my eyes, looking up to one of the many cameras I assume would be near by. It wasn't until late evening that I heard the tinkling. A silver parachute floated down from the sky and landed about ten feet above my head, in the fork of a branch. I unclipped my belt and tried to scale the trunk, with great difficulty. By the time I got there, I couldn't have cared less if it were a bottle of cold water, so I was a little confused to open the box and find a tiny little pot, the size of my palm, sat inside, with a note that read "Apply generously and live. - H." Curious, I opened the lid to reveal a blue goo. I put a little on the burn on my leg and the relief was instantaneous. "Thankyou Haymitch," I whispered, leaning back into the tree trunk, relief flooding through me. I spread more on, until it was covered, and replaced the lid, putting the pot in my pocket ready to go into my bag as soon as I got back down there. Before I can move though, I'm suddenly aware of a pair of eyes watching me from the next tree. Looking over, I gave a startled jump as Rue's face was made out in the darkness. How long had she been there, I wondered. She was pointing to something above my head, and that was when I heard the humming. A wasps nest. No, not wasps, tracker jackers. Tracker jackers weren't normal insects. They came from the Capitol's best laboratories. During the dark days, the Capitol created what they called muttations - their weapons against the rebels. Jabberjays were one such weapon. Birds who flew around the districts, capable of human speech, copying what the rebels were saying, then flying back to the Capitol and spilling all their secrets. However, people were quick to work out what was happening, so fed the jabberjays false information until the Capitol abandoned them. They were expected to die out, as they were all male, so had no female jabberjays to mate with. But they began to reproduce with female mockingbirds instead, creating the mockingjay - the bird on my pin. Tracker jackerers were created not for spying, but for torture, pure and simple. Their nests were planted like landmines up and down the districts and anyone who disturbed them would find themselves, more than likely, on the receiving end of death. They were like wasps, only much bigger, bodies made of solid gold and a sting that could raise a lump the size of a plum. Most people can't handle anymore than a few stings. Some die at once. If you lived, the hallucinations brought on by their venom had driven people into madness. And there was another thing: these wasps would hunt down and kill anyone who disturbed their nests. That was where the tracker part came into it. I looked back over at Rue, who made a sawing motion with her hand, then pointed down to the ground. I looked down at where the Careers were sleeping, and smiled. Looking back up to Rue, to nod that I
understood, I was surprised to see she has disappeared into the trees, into the darkness. I realised we hadn't seen the anthem yet tonight, it must be due any time now, so I got my knife out, and waited. If these were tracker jacker, they were oddly subdued, I thought. Until I remembered that they were probably knocked out from the smoke earlier today. I made my move as soon as the anthem began to blare out, and once I got a groove going, it was easier to keep sawing away. I say easier, I actually meant that it wasn't as hard. I was having to bite the inside of my cheek because blisters were popping on my hand and pain was unbearable. I got about half way through the branch before the music stopped and I had to leave it for the night, making a mental note to continue as soon as the sun began to come out.

Early the next morning, I did just that. Spreading a little more of the blue medicine on my hands and my leg, both of which were healing up nicely, I packed everything up, forced myself to eat a piece of dried beef and a cracker, with a little water, then crept up to the tracker jacker's nest, my rucksack attached tightly to me, for a quick and easy escape.

"Rue," I whispered quietly into the tree tops next to me. I couldn't see her, but I only thought it fair to let her know I was getting ready to crash it, so she wasn't anywhere near by, seeing as she let me know it was there in the first place. Besides I wanted her to have a chance at winning, even if it meant less food for my family with Peeta losing. She popped up, eyes wide, then pointed at the nest. I nodded, pointing at the ground. She grinned, then took off, jumping from tree to tree. I smiled to myself. That must have been how she impressed the Gamemakers. I could just see it now, little Rue, jumping from equipment to equipment, her feet never touching the ground. She should have gotten at least a ten. It was now or never. My hands were sweating now, but I gripped the knife handle and placed the blade in the groove I had created last night. Before I could start sawing, however, I spotted a little golden tracker, hovering lazily near the door to the nest. It was still hazy from the smoke, but they were now beginning to wake up, so I had to act fast. I sawed as fast as I could, and the tracker I had seen spotted me, stinging me in the neck. The pain was like nothing I had ever experienced before. Two more came out and stung me, one on each hand, before the branch snapped off completely, and went crashing to the ground. Thankfully it was only those three that identified me as the enemy, the rest of the nest began buzzing around the ground, launching a full scale attack on the sleeping tributes at the bottom of the tree. I watched as mayhem ensued. The girl from One, Glimmer I had heard her being called (honestly, they gave their children really stupid names in the higher districts), woke up screaming, and was stuck, the tracker jacker swarming over her, stinging every single inch of skin they could find. Peeta, Cato, Clove (the girl from Two) and Marvel (the boy from One), had the sense each to drop everything and run.

"To the lake! To the lake!" Marvel shouted, as he ran off. So the lake must be near by then if they thought they could outrun the wasps quickly enough. The jacker venom had begun to work on me already. I pulled the sting out of the three lumps, and stared at my right hand. I jumped out of the tree and ran towards my river bed I had found yesterday. As I ran, or rather stumbled, my focus became very sparkled and I saw Caesar Flickerman walking out from behind a tree, his blue hair standing out more than ever because of the shin white suit he was wearing.

"The lumps created by tracker jacker venom can be as big as an orange," he was saying, "...wild hallucinations........." He then disappeared and I fell in to the water, trying to wash the venom out as fast as I could, aswell as cutting off the trail from the wasps to myself. I remembered that Glimmer had a bow, so I decided to go back and get it. I was feeling really wobbly, but I managed to get there, although I wasn't prepared for the sight. Glimmer had been beautiful, I had to admit that, but now in death, she had swollen up to three times her size, the lumps oozing green, foul smelling goo. I spotted the bow in her now-sausage like fingers and had to snap them just to get her to let go. I pulled the arrows from her back and stood up, trying to make my way, once more, to the river. As I stood there trying to decide which way the river way, a face - no three face, all the same - bounded up in front of me.

"Cora, what are you doing? Run, go. Get out of here." Peeta? I stared at him, unsure if he was real. I reached out to try and touch his face, but his hands grabbed mine and shouted louder,
looking more panicked that I had ever seen. "GET OUT OF HERE. NOW." Not wanting to argue, I ran.
"Cora, what are you doing? Run, go. Get out of here." I sprinted over to Cora as fast as I could, praying I had lost Cato. She seemed in a daze, and I could see tracker jacker lumps on her neck and hands. She reached out touch me, and as much as I wanted her to, for her hands to cup my face like they had once done a few days ago, I knew I had to send her away before Cato got to her. She wasn't moving. "GET OUT OF HERE. NOW." Her face barely registering, she turned and ran to the river bed where we had found her the day before. Just moments later, I heard crashing behind me, and I knew I was in trouble.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE," Cato snarled in my face, brandishing his sword next to him. "I - I -" I stammered.

"Lover Boy, I'm only going to give you one chance," he said softly in my face, dangerously. "What. Did. You. Do. Where is she?" As I paused, trying to think what I could say to him, he swung at me, his fist connecting with the same place Haymitch's had done a week ago on the tribute train. I fell to the ground, then pulled my knife out of the side of my belt, knowing he was going to kill me, and I wasn't going down without a fight. Jumping up, I swung at him, while he just stepped back and laughed at me as I missed by miles. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Clove and Marvel run up behind Cato, stopping a few feet away, just watching. I looked over at Marvel for just a split second and saw an evil grin spreading across his face. Cato used that time I was distracted to swing at me with his sword, cutting into my right leg, slicing my though open in one swift slice. I fell to the ground howling in agony, blood pouring everywhere. My injuries still hadn't begun to heal from the first day when they all gave me a beating, before I was able to convince them to let me join their group.

"Just leave him there, Cato," snarled Clove. "Leave him to die." Cato seemed to consider this for a moment, and I didn't think he would listen to her advice, because from the few days I had spent with him, he seemed unhinged, but then he leant down so his face was inches from mine. I could feel his warm breath on my cheek.

"I'm going to leave you to die a slow and painful death. Let the animals come for you," he whispered. "See how long we can stretch it out." He grinned, then stood up and kicked me once in the ribs, and skulked off back to the lake with Clove and Marvel. I lay where I was for a few moments trying to catch my breath. I felt the tears begin to roll down my face and I bit my lip, trying to hold them back. I was in absolutely agony, barely able to breathe, losing blood, but I knew I didn't want my family to see me crying. I didn't think it would give my mother satisfaction, but I knew she would be berating me right now for crying. Very slowly, I pushed myself to my feet, the pain in my leg increasing every second. I felt as though I was going to pass out, but I couldn't. I needed to get out of there. I headed towards the river where we found Cora yesterday, that's the way she was headed, so I figured I could try and find her. Half an hour later, it's pretty obvious that I'm not going to get anywhere fast, and I'm so hungry. I had a few bits of food in my bag, but that had been dumped when Cora dropped the tracker jacker nest on us this morning. I had been stung by them aswell, and the lumps on my left leg were still really big and I'm pretty sure one of them was turning purple.

I spent the rest of the day pulling myself slowly down to the river bed, finding somewhere out of sight, and once I had the perfect place, I lay down in the mud, using the mud to camouflage my face like I had done in the training centre with my arm. I couldn't see what I was doing very well, but I tried to make it look as if I were blending in with the mud and the rocks. I lay my head down on one of the lower rocks, then covered my entire body in moss and mud and grass. I knew this would be my last resting place, the sky would be the last thing I see, so I just lay there and waited. The tracker venom was still in my body, and I began hallucinating again. I saw my brothers floating above me, laughing at me. I saw Malin and Cato together, coming towards me with swords. Then Cora was there. Cora. I prayed she was alright, that she was still alive. It was late
afternoon by the time I was settled, or as settled as you could be laying down in the mud waiting to die, so I forced myself to stay awake until the anthem blared out, where I discovered that Cora was still alive. I breathed a sigh of relief, then closed my eyes, going in and out of consciousness over the next couple of days, muttering Cora's name, praying she would come and find me.

~ Cora's POV ~
"Dad, DAD, RUN!" I shouted. "RUN, GET OUT OF THERE." I was stood on the opposite side of the street to the mines in Twelve, and I could see the smoke billowing out of the mouth of the mine. Tears were running down my face, my throat was hoarse from screaming and yet, my dad still didn't appear. I was in my house, in the Seam. There was rubble everywhere and Mayor Undersee was stood in the middle of the room, holding a photograph of dad, trying to hand us a medal. Gale was by my side, but the side of his face was burnt and ragged from the explosion.

I was in the bakery back home in Twelve. An ear piercing scream came from the kitchen, and fireballs came shooting out towards me and as I ducked, Peeta came running out, ablaze. I tried to put him out but I couldn't get close enough and as he burned up, I saw his face, his eyes pleading with me to help him.

The last thing I remember was Peeta shouting at me to go, to run away. He saved my life. I didn't know where I was or how I got there, but my clothes were wet. My joints were stiff, like they hadn't been used for a couple of days, my mouth was dry, furry, and my stomach was rumbling. I sat up very slowly, then began to strip my clothes off until I was in my underwear. Hobbled down to the river, just a few feet away, I washed my clothes quickly, then lay them out on the hot rocks, for the sun to dry them. I then began to wash myself of the mud and the blood, rinsing it all out of my hair, or rather what was left of it after the fire had gotten to it. Thankfully it was still long, but it was up near my shoulders now. As my clothes were drying, I braided my hair again, then sat down, forcing myself to eat a cracker and a strip of beef. The water I had already put iodine in and was ready, but it did nothing for my dry throat. I tried to remember what Gale and Katniss had taught me about edible plants, and came across a honeysuckle bush. Picking one of the heads off, I squeezed the stem and let the sweet nectar drip down my throat. It was amazing, so soft and sweet. I got dressed, taking care of the tracker jacker stings. They were still hurting but nowhere near as much pain as they were the last time I was conscious. I put my clothes back on; they were still a little damp, but it was so hot that I knew the sun would dry them in no time.

Before moving off, I repacked my bag again and counted my arrows. Glimmer. Her face hovered in front of me, but as I looked down at the bow, I only saw dried blood, there was no sign of the green goo I had seen, or rather thought I saw. I realised I would have to find something to eat, so despite my joints still being sore and stiff, I found a wild bird, which looked rather like a turkey, then shot an arrow through its head. It wasn't as clean as Katniss would have done, but it did the job nicely, then I set up a small fire and a spit, then began to skin, gut and cook the bird. As I was turning the meat over, a noise behind me startled me. I jumped up, bow in hand, ready to fire at whoever was coming at me, when I spotted the child's boot peeping out from behind the tree.
"Rue?" I asked softly. "Rue, it's ok, I won't hurt you." She peered around the trunk, her eyes big and wide. "They aren't the only ones who can form allies."
"Really?" she asked. "You want me as an ally?" I could see Haymitch watching me now, pulling his hair out at me wanting to team up with this little wisp of a girl.
"Yes, I do." She sat down next to me, and I slid over to make room for her tiny body.
"You got stung," she said, pointing at my hands and neck. "It's a good job you had the sense to take the stingers out. They aren't as bad."
"Do you know about these?" I asked her.
"Yes," she nodded. "We have loads of their nests around home."
"Eleven. Agriculture, right?"
"Yeah. I work in the fields, climbing the trees. We have to know about them, it saves lives. Come here." She pulled out these leaves that I vaguely recognised from home, and to my surprise, popped them in her mouth. Pulling out the slobbery wad of leaves, she spread them on my left
hand. The relief was instantaneous. "Oh my god that's amazing," I moaned. "Quick, do this one." I held my right hand out, then opened the neck of my jacket for her to do. It was the best feeling in the world. The leaves pulling out whatever venom was left in my body. She giggled as I examined my now venom free hands. "Ok we need to eat," I said. "Do you want a leg?"
"Oh I couldn't take that much," she said, eyeing up the strange bird on the spit. "Don't be daft," I grinned, hanging her a leg. She dug into it like she hadn't eaten for weeks, which she probably hadn't, so I gave her my rabbit leg too. She smiled gratefully as she worked her way through the first one and picked up the second. "This is called a groosling," she told me, as she tore into the second leg. "We have them running wild back home." As she spoke, I noticed a long burn running down her forearm. "Come here, I've got something for your arm." I pulled out my little pot of blue medicine and rubbed a little bit into the burn. The relief etched on her face was instant. "Wow, you have some amazing sponsors," she said, longingly. "Have you had anything yet?"
"No, not yet."
"You will do, once we get nearer the end. People will realise how talented you are." Rue pulls out some starchy root and puts it onto the spit, to share with the groosling. It's really tasty and fills us up nicely. We told each other about our Districts, although I was pretty sure most of it would be cut out by the Gamemakers. Wouldn't want information about other Districts being loose, would we?! "So is it true about you and the boy from your District," she asked, a huge grin across her tiny face. "Is what true?" I asked, trying to look innocent. "You know. You and him. Being in love." I smiled, but changed the subject a little. "Have you seen him? Is he alive?"
"Yeah. I've been over to the lake and he isn't there with the Career Pack anymore. I think I saw him down by the river the other day." She was rubbing her eyes, so we packed up and climbed a tree, crawling into my sleeping bag together. Rue seemed more than grateful, apparently she had spent her nights in the arena so far high up in trees, freezing cold. As she snuggled into me, her tiny body relaxing into sleep, I couldn't help but think of Posy again. How would she cope if she were thrust into the Games so young.
Chapter 15

~ Gale's POV ~

Cora was in the Final Eight with Peeta. That meant Caesar Flickerman and his entourage would be coming to District Twelve to interview their friends and family. For Cora, that meant me, Katniss, and her best friend, Ione. For Peeta, that meant his family - including his mother, and his brothers Jasper and Darrell - and his two best friends, Delly and Yoren. We were allowed the day off of school so that we could be interviewed, and as I was getting Posy dressed, there came a knock on the door.

"Well hello, you must be Gale." The woman standing at my door was definitely not from around here. She screamed Capitol. "My name's Venetia." She extended a well groomed and highly polished hand out to me, which I took, in a bit of a daze. I despised everything to do with the Capitol, and now, here was a perfect example of what I hated, standing on my doorstep. Yet with her dark hair and olive skin, she looked as though she could be from the Seam. It was only the lack of coal dust under her nails and her garish purple and blue make up which confirmed she was, indeed, Capitol.

"Come in, please," I said, finally remembering my manners, and stepping back to allow her entry to our home. I did wonder how she would react, but I assume she had been doing this for a long time now, because she just smiled and said we had a lovely home. Most people from the Capitol would have wrinkled their noses.

"I'm sorry we're here so early," she said, sitting down with a glass of goat's milk, "we have so much to do that we like to travel overnight and get a good head start on things."

"No, it's fine," I smiled.

"Caesar will be here in about half an hour, he is still in the hovercraft at the moment. I like to come ahead, to meet you before he arrives. Now befo-"

"Kayle, Kayle, I can't find my shoe. Are you wearing it?" Posy called out from her room.

"Excuse me, please," I smiled, standing up and leaving Venetia in the kitchen for a moment.

"Sweetheart, your shoes don't fit me, remember?" I smiled softly to Posy, scooping her up into my arms.

"Is Cora back?"

"No sweetie, but there's a lady who has come to talk to us about Cora. Would you like to come and meet her?" Her face lit up.

"Yes please!"

"Ok, let's go and see if mummy is ready and we'll go and talk to the lady." I knocked on mum's bedroom door and she called out, saying she would be there in a moment. She had been up half the night again doing the laundry for Mrs Rodgers and Mrs Wade.

"Well hello, you must be Cora's little sister," Venetia smiled, her face lighting up at the sight of Posy in her best dress. Posy was going to stay with Mrs Rogers for the morning, while mum and I did the interviews, but she still insisted on dressing up nicely. "How do you do? My name's Venetia." She crouched down so she was at my sister's eye level and held her hand out.

"Hello, I'm Posy, and I'm five whole years old."

"Wow that's a very big age," Venetia smiled. Before Posy could answer, the door knocked again and Mrs Rogers walked in.

"Are you ready sweetie?" she asked Posy. "Oh hello, I'm so sorry I didn't see you there," she said to Venetia, holding out her hand. They chatted for a few minutes till mum came in, looking beautiful. After Posy had been taken to Mrs Rogers's house, Venetia explained that we would be conducting the interviews at the Hall of Justice, because there were two sets of families. This would be easier and it meant they could then move down to District Eleven to interview Thresh's and Rue's families later that afternoon.

A room had been set up specifically for the interviews, on the second floor of the Justice Building. The cameras were being set up as we arrived, and as we were being ushered into the next room,
my stomach suddenly flipped, my palms got sweaty and I started to panic. "Don't worry," Ione whispered to me. "I'm sure it will all be fine."
"Thanks," I smiled. We sat down just as Peeta's family walked in. I nodded to Jasper and he nodded back. We were in the same class at school and although we didn't stick to the same circles, we got on well enough. His older brother Darrell however, was sat next to their mother, looking petrified.
"Good morning, and thankyou for agreeing to come." Caesar Flickerman bounced into the room with an energy unlike which we normally see in the districts. "If you don't mind, we're going to spend the next hour working with my team just adding a little bit of make up. It's not because we think you need any, not at all," he grinned, "but the camera will be able to things up better that way. Now, can we go around and introduce ourselves?" Caesar was different in person to the energy you see on screen. Yes he was very Capitol, but he seemed, I don't know, relaxed. More relaxed in the districts than I would have thought for someone so used to the high end lifestyle. I couldn't place my finger on it, so I made my mind up to casually mention it to Venetia later on.
"I'm Lorelei, Peeta's mother, and this is my husband, Remus." Mrs Mellark was wearing a patterned green dress, one she usually wore when watching the Reapings. Mr Mellark simply smiled.
"It's lovely to meet you," smiled Caesar, shaking their hands. He turned to the next seat.
"Hi, I'm Jasper, I'm Peeta's older brother."
"I'm Darrell, I'm the oldest brother."
"Hello, I'm Delly. I'm one of Peeta's best friends." Delly, with her blonde hair in curls, looked like an angel. Especially with her light blue dress she had worn, especially for today.
"And I'm Yoren, I've been Peeta's best friend since we were five." He shook Caesar's hand, who took it warmly. As he turned to me, I wondered if my voice would work, but he put us all at such ease that I needn't have worried.
"I'm Gale," I said. "I'm Cora's brother."
"It's lovely to meet you, Gale," he smiled. "Cora has certainly made an influence on everyone back in the Capitol. She's a lovely girl."
"Thankyou," I smiled.
"And you must be Cora's mother," Caesar said brightly.
"Yes, I'm Hazelle. It's nice to meet you."
"Hi, I'm Katniss, I'm one of Cora's best friends." Katniss seemed defiant in hating the Capitol just as much as me, but she did seem to be warming to Caesar. I think the fact he was so relaxed made it easier. He made us feel at home, even with all the cameras and stylists.
"And I'm Ione, I'm Cora's other best friend."
"Well it's lovely to meet you all," said Caesar warmly, sitting back in his chair. "Ok so my team of stylists will get to work in just a moment, we can have something to eat first if you would like, and then we can go in to the other room and do the interviews. The television was playing as we waited for the style team, and while people were next door being interviewed so I sat back and watched the mentors being interviewed in the Capitol.
"Venetia?"
"Mmm?"
"Caesar. He's really nice, isn't he," I said. She took the comb handle out of her mouth and smiled. "Yeah. He really knows how to put the tributes at ease. He's perfect for this job."
"He, um, he seems really relaxed and at ease in the Districts. More than I thought he would."
"Mm hm." Venetia put some kind of gel in my hair. It looked really odd, but smelt amazing.
"Is there any reason for that, or, er, is that just the way he is."
"He has his reasons. Now, that's you done. Can you send Yoren over next please," she smiled.
While it was clear she was dismissing me, it was done in such a way that told me that I hadn't said anything wrong, she wasn't annoyed, the conversation was just over. It didn't stop me from being curious about it all though. These people were completely different to how I ever imagined.
As Caesar came out to get Katniss, his eye caught something on screen and he stopped for a moment to watch. Looking over, I saw one of the District Seven mentors, Acacia Monroe.
"Wow, she's beautiful!" Ione said softly, and I watched Caesar glance down at her.
"She is, isn't she?" he replied.
"Is that her mum with her?" Ione indicated the redhead beside Acacia.
"Yes," Caesar answered.
"She's stunning too."
Caesar smiled tenderly and nodded. "She always was."
"The odds definitely weren't in that family's favour, were they?" Mrs Mellark commented dryly.
"Or perhaps they were, seeing as they both survived."
"I wouldn't say being reaped yourself and then seeing your daughter go through the same thing really puts them in the category of 'lucky', Mrs Mellark," Ione retorted.
"Well, the girl definitely had one up on Peeta and Cora, with her mother having done it already."
"Victor or not, Willow Monroe did the exact same thing as you had to do - she had to watch the child she loves fight for her life in the arena," Caesar said, and his voice was icier than I would have thought was even possible for him.
Mrs Mellark glared daggers at Caesar but wisely said no more, and I saw Mr Mellark try, and almost succeed, in containing a smile. The only mistake Caesar had made however, was assuming that Mrs Mellark loved her son. After Katniss's interview, I was up. Oh god, what was I going to say? I walked over to the door where Caesar was stood and walked into the room.
"There's no need to be nervous," Caesar smiled, indicating for me to sit opposite him. "We won't go straight into the interview, don't worry. I just want to talk a little so you feel more relaxed."
"Ok, that's fine." My insides were so jittery and my hands were shaking so much I had to put them on my lap. Caesar was in a simple suit today. It was cream coloured, with a hint of sparkle, a cream waistcoat visible under his jacket, and a dark blue, checkered shirt underneath the waistcoat. His hair was as blue as ever, yet it seemed more blue than I had ever seen before, even on the clearest day in the woods.
"So Gale, you're Cora's older brother, am I right?"
"Yeah."
"What was it like growing up together?"
"Well living in the Seam it wasn't always easy, but there are only a couple of years between us, so we've always been close."
"And do you have other siblings, or has it just been the two of you?"
"No, we have two little brothers and a little sister as well."
"Five of you! Wow, I bet your mum had her hands full," Caesar chuckled. I laughed, a genuine laugh, because I had remembered something that had been buried deep in my memories.
"Cora has always been feisty. Always stuck up for others, always been stubborn, but she has always been the kindest person I know. Except for this one time when we were kids. We were playing hide and seek in the Meadow near our house. I had gone to hide, with Ione and my friend Gray. Cora was meant to be finding us, except she didn't."
"Oh and why's that?" asked Caesar, intrigued.
"I didn't know at the time, but she had gotten bored, and after finding Ione, the pair of them had walked into town and sat opposite the bakery. Just sat there, watching," I grinned.
"Watching anything in particular?"
"Yeah," I laughed, "Peeta Mellark! I was so mad when I came down the tree. She had left Grayson and me up there for over an hour." Caesar started chuckling.
"She was watching Peeta? Our lovely Peeta?"
"Yeah. She's had a huge crush on him ever since she's known him, but the last couple of years or so, I think it's grown into something else."
"Ione said something similar."
"Ione would know about it more than me," I grinned. "They've been best friends forever. Whenever we need bread, or anything from the bakery really, it's always Cora who volunteers to go and get it."
"That's so sweet. But I'm afraid our time is up. Thankyou so much Gale." It was over already? I didn't realise it, but we had been in the room for ten minutes. He shook my hand firmly, but
warmly, and we went back into the main room. Jasper was next in, to talk about Peeta and I was
given permission by Venetia to sit in and watch, as long as I stayed quiet.
"Hello Jasper," Caesar said, holding his hand out. Jasper took it and smiled. He flicked his blonde
hair out of his eyes, like Peeta does, and sat down on the chair I had been sat in only moments
before. "So you're one of Peeta's older brothers?"
"Yeah," he smiled nervously. I hoped I didn't look as nervous as him, but they never did on
screen, so I assume they did something when editing the videos later on.
"And are the two of you close?"
"Yeah, we share a bedroom, so even if he doesn't tell me something I can usually see it."
"I hear Peeta has a special talent in the bakery that your family runs. Am I right?"
"He decorates the cakes. They are so delicate and beautiful, I'm actually quite jealous! But it's
something he has been able to do since he was a kid."
"He decorated them when he was a kid?"
"No," smiled Jasper, "but he has always been amazing at drawing. He would draw pictures of the
leaves in the autumn, of a sunset, of someone just sat at a table, and they would be so life like that
it was as though they were photographs."
"That's quite a talent," grinned Caesar. When you were just watching him, and not the one talking
to him, I realised just how much Caesar put people at ease. Venetia was right, he was perfect for
this job. It was good to see someone from the Capitol who cared about us.
"He doesn't know I know this, but he has hundreds of drawings of Cora, just hidden away. I'm
not going to say where, but he has been drawing her for a while." Caesar laughed at this, and I
had let out a smile.
"So he has liked her for a while?"
"He hasn't realised it, but yes. It's only been the last year or so that he admitted it out loud to me.
As the older brother though, I had to tease him of course!"
"Yes," laughed Caesar heartily, nodding. He didn't say any more on the subject though, so I
wondered if he really knew what it was like to tease a sibling, or have one tease you. "So I take it
you weren't as surprised as we were in the Capitol when he said he was in love with her?"
"No, not really. A lot of us here have been trying to convince the pair of them for a while to tell
each other. She hasn't said anything to me, but I used to see her sitting across the street from the
bakery just watching the store."
"And did Peeta see her?"
"Oh yes. He would usually do something clumsy like drop bread into the fire, or slice in to his
finger. Always while blushing."
"That's lovely," smiled Caesar, "but I'm afraid that's it now, our ten minutes is up." Jasper stood
up and walked over to me, where I was sat by the door.
"How did I do?" he asked?
"Brilliant," I grinned. I didn't know your little brother used to do that?"
"Haha yeah, I would tease him mercilessly about it." I could see Venetia, flicking her head to the
door, so I assumed I had to leave now. As Mrs Mellark walked through the door, and through me
and Jasper, I knew I had guessed correctly.

Sitting down in the main room, I sat next to Katniss, who smiled at me.
"How did it go?" she asked.
"Really well, yeah."
"I miss her too, Gale."
"I know you do, Catnip. Thankyou for being here today."
"Of course," she said, squeezing my hand.

Saying goodbye to Caesar, Venetia and the rest of the team, Caesar promised that they would get
started on the editing as soon as the hovercraft was in the air and that it would air in a couple of
ights. Before he left, I pulled Caesar to one side.
"I'm sorry for asking, but......"
"It's ok, what's the matter?" Caesar asked gently. I think he could sense my worry.
"My sister... is she - I mean, is she alright?"
"Cora is a fighter, Gale. She is lucky to have such a caring family, and especially an older brother like you." He patted my arm and smiled sadly.
"Thankyou," I said, tears prickling my eyes. I watched as they boarded the hover craft, and once it had disappeared into the sky, I went home to get changed. Katniss wanted to go hunting and I wanted to go with her.
~ Gale's POV ~
Two nights later, we were crowded round the television in our small living room. Katniss, Primrose, and their mum were with us too. Caesar's face came up on screen. He was wearing a different suit to the one we had seen him in, but his hair was the same blue as it had been this year. "I met him, I met him," squealed Posy, jumping up and down in her seat next to Primrose. "Did you?" Vick asked. Vick and Rory had been at school all day, so they missed out on meeting the Master of Ceremonies, but they weren't upset about it.
"Mmm hmm," my sister said, still bouncing. "Mrs Rogers had to go into town, so I went with her. We walked past the barber shop, where Mr Rogers goes to get his hair cut and we saw him coming out of the Hall of Justice." She was so full of innocence and energy, she was like a breath of fresh air. "I was wearing my dress, the one with the red and yellow flowers, and the blue skirt." "That sounds beautiful, Posy," Mrs Everdeen smiled. "I skipped up to Kayle because Mrs Rogers let me and Ceez - Ceese - the man with the blue hair came out and he said hello to me. He promised me he would give Cora a daisy I picked aswell." I exchanged a look with Mrs Everdeen, but said nothing to Posy. Caesar may have been friendly, but he was still Capitol, and I doubted he would keep hold on his promise.
"Hazelle, it's starting," called Mrs Everdeen, and mum came in from the kitchen, where she had been washing up our dinner things. Katniss and I had offered, but mum wanted to do it. "We are down to the final eight tributes," Caesar smiled. "Yesterday, I went out to the districts to interview their families. Let's see what happened." He turned to the screen behind him and District One came into view. We watched the family of Marvel talk about him, how he was a lovely boy, an only child, but he did whatever he wanted. In District Two, Clove and Cato's families and friends were discussing them. The same with Jade in Five, and Thresh and Rue in Eleven. My heart jolted when I saw Rue's family. Her dad had died too, he fell from a tree and broke his back she said. Rue was the oldest out of six of them. Finally, District Twelve came on screen. "There's Yonie," squealed Posy, as Ione came on screen. The last to come on screen was Mrs Mellark.
"So Lorelei, you're Peeta's mother," said Caesar, in a tone a little icier than he had spoken to the rest of us in, but it wasn't very noticeable otherwise. She had really upset him. "Yes," she smiled. "So tell me about him." "He's a lovely boy, we're really close." "Really," smiled Caesar, just the mildest hint of surprise in his voice. "Oh yes, I was the one who encouraged him to practise his drawings so he could decorate the cakes in the bakery." She was acting up to the cameras, of course. Anyone who knew her knew what an evil cow she was. But to the rest of Panem, she seemed like the perfect, doting mother.

~ Cora's POV ~
I didn't have a very good sleep, nightmares plaguing my dreams. When I woke up, I thought I was back at home in Twelve. Posy had crawled into bed with me and she was snuggled under my arm. Opening my eyes, I realised I was in a tree, in a sleeping bag and it was Rue under my arm sleeping peacefully, not Posy. "Cora?" she murmured, rubbing her eyes. "I'm here." "Last night, we're you serious about what you said?" "About the Career pack? Yeah. If they are by the lake, like you said, and piled the food up, then we should teach them what hunger is all about." "Great," she said, grinning. After a breakfast of the rest of last night's groosling and some berries Rue had found, we got started on our plan. We started by gathering leaves and branches, then piling them up, in five
different spots around the woods. Rue had been very observant about the Careers base, so we had a lot of work to do.
"This stuff's gonna smoke like crazy once you light it, so light and run to the next one," I told her. "We'll meet back here when we've done."
"Great, we just need to come up with a signal, to let each other we are alright."
"Um, like what?"
"Try this." She whistled a simple, four note tune, and it was repeated back to us from above. "Mockingjays," I whispered, in amazement.
"We have them at home, in Eleven. We use them to let people know when its quitting time or when someone is ok. That how I knew I could trust you, when I saw your mockingjay pin."
"Thank you Rue." I didn't know what else to say.
"Okay, your turn." I tilted my head to the sky and whistled my own four note tune, which was once again, repeated back. "Brilliant!"
"Cora, destroy it all." Rue wrapped her arms around me and clung on tightly. I folded her into me and held her.
"I will. I'll see you for supper, ok?"
"Okay." She squeezed me one more time, then ran off towards the first pile we had built, ready to set fire to it. I made my way towards the lake, to where the Careers had set up base camp.

I crawled under the bushes and hid, not too far away, but a good distance so that they wouldn't see me, even if the bushes weren't covering me. Now all I had to do was wait for Rue to set the first fire. I didn't have to wait long. Five minutes later, I watched as Cato stood up, his eyes locked on something in the woods on the opposite side to my hiding place.
"Guys, over there, look," he said excitedly. Marvel and Clove jumped up, spotting the smoke just seconds later. Grabbing their weapons, they ran off towards the disturbance, while I sat and waited, just watching for the moment. The pyramid of food and equipment puzzled me. Why would they need to do it, and why would they so readily walk away from it. Unless it was guarded by something. I was just about to step out from my hiding place, when something caught the corner of my eye. Running out from the bushes was Foxface. She reached the outer circle of the pyramid, where the ground had been dug up, then did what looked like a funny little dance, hopping here, jumping there, balancing on one leg and at one point she overstepped, falling forward onto her hands. She squealed, then stood back up. Taking a few supplies and bits of food, enough to get by, but not enough to get noticed, she did the dance again, then ran back off into the woods. Why did she squeal when she fell over? It was like she expected the ground to explode........

Of course! I crept out from my hiding spot and over to where I could see the front of the twenty four metal plates we had all risen up on a few days ago. The ground had been disturbed in front of each and every one of them. When we roes into the arena, there were landmines in front of us, but after the 60 seconds, they were deactivated. The Careers must have reactivated them, then buried them around the pyramid of supplies. I had to silently commend them for that one! I'd never seen anyone in the Games do that before, I bet it gave the Gamemakers a shock. Glancing back up at the woods, I see Rue had set the second fire, which means I didn't have a lot of time left. I couldn't throw my knife in there, I would lose it, if I threw a rock in there it might explode one or two mines, but I needed all of them. And that's when I saw it. A burlap sack filled with apples. Just dangling there, without a care in the world. I knew what I needed to do. I lifted the bow, and tried to remember everything Katniss had taught me when shooting. I loaded the first arrow and tried to think. Breath slowly. In. Out. In. Out. In. Shoot. I let go of the arrow and stay exactly where I am, watching the arrow fly through the air and hit its target. It hit the top of the bag, causing it to split, but not enough to do any damage. Damn. I moved a few inches closer and tried again. In. Out. In. Out. In. Shoot. The arrow hit exactly where I wanted it to go. The bottom of the bag split open, the apples dribbled out of the bag, over the barrels and onto the ground. A split second later, it felt as though - sorry, make that it sounded as though my whole world had exploded. One mine went off, then another, then another and on and on, until there were no more left. I tried to stand up, but
my legs had turned to jelly and I was pretty sure I was now completely deaf in my left ear. After minute, the ground stopped vibrating and I was able to crawl back to my hiding spot under the bushes. Just in time too, because as I turned around, Cato, Marvel, and Clove had returned. I had to stop myself from laughing though, because Cato looked completely insane. I swear he was bouncing around like a gorilla, pulling his hair out and I'm sure if I were close enough to see, he would be foaming at the mouth too. The barrels were in pieces everywhere, there was no salvageable food or supplies anywhere. I might be deaf, but our plan had worked. After a while, I began to make my way back to mine and Rue's meeting place. Placing my hand on my ear, I realised it was bloody. No blood trails, I thought, so pulled my hood up over my head and pulled the cord tight against my head. Slowly and feeling very dizzy, I made my way back. By the time I got there, my head had cleared a bit, but my ear was still deaf. I cleaned out my ear with some of my water, to stave off infection, then whistled our four note tune, waiting for Rue to reply. And waited. And waited. I began to panic now. The third pile was the furthest from our camp site, and she was probably just taking her time, but even so. I decided to go and look for her, when I heard an ear piercing scream.

"CORAAAAAAAAAAAAA!
I didn't care who was around, I knew that voice.

"CORAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, WHERE ARE YOU!"
"RUE I'M COMING," I called back and ran towards the noise as fast as I could. I found Rue trapped under a large net, pinning her to the ground.

"Oh Cora I was so scared," she cried flinging her arms around me, once I released her.
"I know, I know, it's ok, I'm here now." She pulled back to say something and stared ahead of her. Behind me, with my one good ear, I heard a rustling, and instinctively pulled out my knife and swung it out behind me, flinging it towards the enemy. It hit it's target; Marvel went straight down onto his knees with my knife right through his heart. I turned round to face Rue, but as I did, I saw the spear sticking out of her chest. She pulled it out and collapsed onto the ground. My stomach dropped, I felt sick, but I knew there was nothing I could do for her now. She lay down in my arms and her hand reached up to me. It was as if it were me dying and not her.

"Cora?"
"Yes?"
"You blew up the food?"
"Every last bit."
"You have to win," she told me.
"I will." And I mean it. Not just for my family, but for Rue. "I'm going to win for the both of us."
"Cora?" she whispered, and I leant in closer. "Will you sing?"

I gently brush her thick, dark, curly hair out of her eyes.

"Of course I will." I didn't even have to think. The song that came straight to me was a lullaby from our district. I sang it to Posy sometimes when she couldn't sleep. It was really old, I wasn't sure how old though, but it came from somewhere in our hills. Our music teacher taught us when we were five. My throat was tight from tears, hoarse from the acrid smoke from the landmines, but I don't care. This was Rue's last request and I wasn't going to let her down. The words were easy and soothing, promising that tomorrow would be more hopeful than the awful piece of time we called today. I gave a small cough, swallowed hard and begun.

Deep in the meadow, under the willow
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes
And when again they open, the sun will rise

Here it's safe, here it's warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you

Deep in the meadow, hidden far away
A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray
Forget your woes and let your troubles lay
And when it's morning, they'll wash away

Here it's safe, here it's warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm

The last two lines were barely audible

Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you

I looked down to find Rue had stopped breathing, so I closed her eyes very gently for her, and zipped up her jacket so the spear wound wasn't showing. Tears were now rolling down my face, dripping on to her, and I leant down and carefully kissed her temple. I cut her bag from her shoulders because I knew she would want me to have it, and I threw the spear away from me as far as I could. I knew they would want me to clear out so they could collect her body, but I couldn't just leave her like that. I gathered all the white flowers in the area and carefully laid them around her, covering up her wound, and by the time I finished, she looked peaceful, angelic, as though she were sleeping on a bed of flowers. I knew I had to walk away, so after looking into the nearest camera, pressing three fingers to my lips and holding them high in the air, I walked away without looking back. I heard the two cannons, go off and knew the hover craft would be coming for Rue and Marvel.

Once I was far enough away, I collapsed behind a large tree and let the tears flow. I howled, I screamed, I was in pain. She shouldn't have even been here, she was too young. A tinkling noise pierced through my grief and I looked up to see a little silver parachute coming towards me. It landed in a bush a few feet away and once I had wiped away the tears I stood up to open it. Looking inside I gasped. There was not one, but two gifts in there for me.
Chapter 17

I pulled out the first - a small loaf of bread. It wasn't the fine white Capitol bread. This was made from dark ration grain. It was shaped like a crescent and was sprinkled in seeds. It was also still warm. When I broke it open, the steam poured out. I tried to think back to the bread lesson Peeta had given me over lunchtime in the Training Centre and realised this was from District Eleven. This must have cost them a fortune. I could only guess that they were going to send it to Rue, but instead of pulling it back, they authorised Haymitch to send it to me. I didn't know the reason, but whatever it was, this was a first. A district gift to a tribute who isn't your own. I peered into the pot and pulled out the second gift. It was a small piece of a card with a well preserved daisy attached. I wondered who had sent it to me, when I saw the writing at the bottom. "Love from Posy." There two things I need to do right now and the first was the most important. I lifted my head to a camera.

"Thankyou to the people of District Eleven," I said, as bravely as I could. "And thankyou Posy." I tucked the little card into my pocket and zipped it up so it was safe, then after heading down to the river to wash the blood out of everything, I climbed the highest tree I could find. Not for safety, but to just get away from the horror of today. I ate the bread with some more berries Rue had left me. It tasted really good. It tasted of home. An hour or so later, the anthem began and the seal appeared in the sky. Only two faces came up tonight - Marvel's and Rue's. There were now six of us left, I realised. Just six. I would worry about that tomorrow, I thought as I tucked into the tree. I would sort out the packs, get the supplies into one bag and start again in the morning. For now though, I wanted to sleep.

I woke up to the mockingjays early the next morning, whistling Rue's tune and for a moment I thought it was her, but I looked down at the two packs on my lap and realised it was just the birds. As I was debating what to do today, a voice sounded out over the arena.

"Tributes. There has been a slight change to the rules this year. Two tributes may be crowned victors if they originate from the same district. This will be the only announcement." I tried to process his words. Two tributes. Same district. And suddenly I was climbing down the tree and calling out a name.

"Peeta, Peeta!" I remembered Rue had seen him down by the river, so I made my way downstream, and very soon I spot a blood trail. It looks as though it has been there a couple of days, but it still wet from the water. I followed it for an hour and it suddenly ended. He must be here, he couldn't have just vanished into thin air. As I looked around for any sign of him, any clue to where he could have gone next, something grabbed my leg. I screamed and looked down to see a hand clamped around my ankle. A pair of eyes were laying in the mud, just above a mouth. Peeta.

"Peeta, oh my god, you're alive." I knelt down and started scraping the mud and moss from his face and body. I couldn't even begin to describe the relief I felt at seeing him again. As soon as he was free, I pulled him up into me, and he wrapped him arms around me, his face nuzzled into my neck. I could feel his racking sobs against me as I held him, not wanting to let go.

"I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off," I grinned. He moved away to look up at me.

"Yes frosting, the final defence of the dying," smiled Peeta.

"You're not going to die," I told him firmly.

"Say who?"

"Says me. We're on the same team now."

"Yes, so I heard. It's nice of you to finally find what's left of me," he said dryly, causing me to glare at him, but smile at the same time.

"What was it?" I asked, pulling out my water bottle and giving him a drink.

"A sword. Cato." Talking seemed like a struggle now. He moved the moss away from his leg and showed me the damage.

"Come on, let's get you cleaned up. I'm going to try and roll you into the stream."
"Lean down a minute first," he said, "I need to tell you something." I leant down and pressed my ear gently against his lips. They tickled me as he whispered. "Remember, we're madly in love, you can kiss me anytime you want, you know." I moved away and looked into his eyes.

"I know." Then I softly pressed my lips against his. "Like that?" I asked him, moving away and smiling. He looked like all his birthdays had come at once. He slowly opened his eyes and nodded.

"Like that," he whispered.

I tried to help him stand up, to get him into the stream, but it quickly became clear that while the water was only a couple of feet away, the mud and the vines had clamped him tight into them and he wasn't in any fit state to try and move himself. I gave one last tug under his arms and he broke free, his teeth gritted, tears streaked down his mud-caked face. We were still only a foot away from the water but it was obvious he wasn't going to go any further. I crouched down beside him and told him to hold on, I was going to try rolling him in. I only made one full roll before I had to stop, mostly because of the awful sound he was making. He was right on the edge of the stream now, so I guess it was better.

"Right, we need to try and get your clothes off," I told him. I had two water bottles, plus Rue's water skin, so while I was pouring water over Peeta, trying to loosen the mud, I had two propped up against the rocks always filling with water. Eventually, enough mud had been loosened and I was able to unzip his jacket. I gently loosened it off, along with his shirt, but discovered his undershirt was caked in blood from his chest wounds that I had to cut off with my knife and soak it again with water, before I was able to ease it off of him. I gasped at the sight of his chest. It was badly bruised, with a long burn stretching across it and four tracker jacker stings. I knew I was able to do something about this, before I even attempted to try and sort out what damage Cato had done. Treating his wounds would have been pointless while he was sat in what was essentially a now muddy puddle, so I manage to prop him up against a boulder while I washed the rest of the mud from his hair, his pale skin. I rubbed some of my blue medicine into his burn, which soothed him immediately, although I couldn't help but notice that he was burning up. Hotter than he should have been. The tracker jacker stings were easy to fix too. I dug around in the lumps to pull out the stingers, which caused him to wince, but he bit his lip and tried not make a fuss. Putting some of Rue's leaves in my mouth, I pressed the slobbery wad of leaves onto them, so they could draw out the poison. I saw the relief on his face as he tried to stay sat up.

"Swallow these," I ordered him, passing him two little white pills that I recognised. I had taken a first aid kit from Marvel after I had thrown my knife through his heart. These pills should bring his temperature down. He does so, with a little water, and I tried to get some food into him. He hadn't eaten for days and he needed something in him if I was to try and help him move to safety. He resisted at first, but I was able to get piece of dried fruit into him.

"Okay I need to look at your look at your leg now," I told him gently.

"Can I sleep now please?" he asked wearily.

"Soon, I promise, but I have to try and clean your leg up." I cupped his face in my hand softly and stared into his eyes.

"Okay." Very carefully, I took his boots off and rolled his socks over his feet. The difficult part was now trying to ease his trousers off over his wound. I'd seen alot of things over the years, but nothing had prepared me for the sight of Peeta’s open wound, oozing blood and pus. It was swollen, and smelt like rotting flesh. It was a shock, but I wasn’t going anywhere. I was going to stay and help him. I couldn’t let him die, I don’t know what I would do if he did.

“Pretty bad, huh," he smiled, when he saw my face.

“Yeah, but I’m going to try. I promise.” His undershorts were filthy aswell, so I took them off him too, rolling them slowly and gently over his leg. I knew that his clothes had to be cleaned, aswell as the wound, in case of infection.

" Doesn't this bother you?" Peeta asked, sitting on the rock in the sun.

"Not really, growing up with five of us in such a small house; well, you can imagine, there wasn't much room for modesty." Peeta grinned at me.
"Yeah I can imagine!"
"Now come on you, get some more food in your stomach while I wash your clothes, and then I'll see what I can do about your leg." He nodded, and tried to sip some water and eat some dried apple, but I could see it was a struggle.
Once his clothes were washed, I flattened them out on a couple of large rocks so the sun could dry them. Now for his leg. I was going to have to experiment, so I wadded up some more of Rue's leaves in my mouth and pressed them onto the gash. Within moments, pus was flowing freely down his leg. This was a good thing, I assumed. I cleaned that up, and then did it a second time, until I couldn't see anymore pus. Once it was cleaned up a bit, I saw it had gone right down to the bone. My stomach turned a little and it must have shown on my face.
"Cora? Cora, are you ok?"
"Yeah, I'm fine; I just wasn't expecting it to be so, so deep."
"You've gone green. How on earth do you hunt?"
"That's different. Though for all I know, I'm killing you."
"Well can you speed it up then?" he grinned.
"No, shut up and eat your pears," I grinned back.
I didn't know what else to do, except maybe rub some burn ointment into it and wrap it up. I let him doze for a couple of hours, while his clothes were still drying and I managed to catch some fish in the stream for us to eat. By late afternoon however, I was getting itchy to get moving. We were too exposed out here, so I woke him up and helped him get dressed again. I left his feet bare however, so we could walk downstream and find somewhere safe to sleep for the night, where Peeta could try and recover. I packed everything away, tied the rucksack to my shoulders, and then I lifted him up, throwing his arm over my shoulders and wrapping one of mine around his waist. About 150 feet downstream, it was obvious he was going to black out, so I sat him down, rubbing his back. As he tried to get himself back together, my eyes scanned the rocks surrounding us. I would have loved nothing more than to get him into a tree tonight, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. My heart leapt however, when I spotted a cave like formation just 50 feet away. Once Peeta was ready, I propped him up again and we made our way, slowly, downstream to the cave.

Once he was in the cave, I layered the floor with pine needles, put my sleeping bag down, on top of the plastic sheeting, and got Peeta into it. He was paper white and shivering, but his forehead was burning up and his eyes were looking dark and hollow. I was suddenly scared he was going to die. I knew I had to cover us, so once he was resting again, I set about covering the entrance with vines.
"Cora," he murmured, "thankyou for finding me."
"You would have found me if you could," I replied, stroking his forehead. I knew the medicine wasn't working and I didn't know what else to do. I was able to get some more water and pills into him when he wasn't concentrating, but I couldn't get any more food into him.
"Cora, if I don't -"
"Don't. Don't talk like that."
"But if I -"
"No," I told him, firmly. "I don't even want to talk about it Peeta." I leant down and pressed my lips against his. Even though he was semi-conscious by this point, I still felt his body react to mine and I gently leant my forehead against his. Kissing him on his head, I set about trying to make the cave a reasonable place to stay for the foreseeable future, but was distracted by a tinkling noise outside. Checking that Peeta was ok, I left the safety of the cave for a moment to retrieve the parachute. Opening the case, I found a pot, and a little card on top that read "Stay Alive. - H" I lifted the lid, and the smell of fresh broth drifted into my nostrils. It was watery, but that was good, because anything too heavy would have upset Peeta's stomach. There was a spoon with it too. Thankyou, I mouthed to Haymitch, and went back into the cave to wake Peeta up.
"Peeta, Peeta wake up," I said softly, stroking his forehead. He was getting hotter. He slowly opened his eyes and looked up at me.
"What's happened?"
“Haymitch has sent you some soup. No it’s ok, stay there, I'll feed you.” It took me an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening and more kissing, but I finally got the whole pot of broth into him. “Why are you doing this?” he asked me as he finished the last mouthful.

“You would do the same for me.”

“Yes, but why are you doing this, really?”

“You know why, Peeta.” I bite my lip and look up at him.

“You really meant it?” he asked me.

“Just close your eyes and go back to sleep,” I told him. Once he was finally sleeping, I sat in the mouth of the cave and looked up at the sky, just as the anthem began. The seal appeared in the sky, but no faces followed it. It had been a quiet day today, but I supposed me and Peeta had given the audience enough entertainment to keep them satisfied. Hopefully the Gamemakers would give us a quiet night tonight.
I stayed by the mouth of the cave for a while longer, until the temperature became too chilly. Deciding it would be useless if I were to succumb to the elements, I crawled into the sleeping bag with Peeta and curled up into him. He was warm and toasty, but it took me a few minutes to realise it was hot. Too hot, because the sleeping bag was reflecting back the fever. I checked his forehead again and found it burning and dry. The only thing I could think of doing was wetting a bandage and placing it on his forehead. I had to replace it regularly, but that was nothing compared to having to try and fix his leg. I spent the rest of the night half sitting, half lying next to him, replacing the bandage and worrying. By the time the sun came up, I had barely slept, but I looked over at Peeta, to find his top lip was covered in beads of sweat, which meant to the fever had finally broken. He wasn't back to normal, but he had come down a few degrees. When I was out gathering vines the night before, I had come across a bush of Rue's berries, so I left Peeta sleeping and went to get some. I mashed them into the broth pot with some cold water for him, and when I got back, he was struggling to get up and out of the sleeping bag.

"I woke up and you weren't here. I was worried about you," he said.
"You were worried about me?" I laughed. "Have you seen yourself lately?"
"Cato and Clove like to hunt at night, I thought they had got you."
"I'm okay, Peeta. How do you feel today?" I sat down next to him and felt his forehead again, stroking his hair out of his face.
"Better than yesterday. Clean clothes, medicine, and a sleeping bag........ and you." He smiled, kissing my hand as I stroked his hair. My stomach felt as though it was filled with butterflies.
"No more kisses for you until you've eaten," I told him, smiling. I helped him prop up against the wall and he swallowed each spoonful of the berry mush without fuss.
"You didn't sleep."
"No," I said, shaking my head. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."
"Cora you need to sleep."
"I'm fine," I lied. The truth was, I was exhausted, but Peeta looked firm.
"Sleep. I'm feeling alot better. Come on, I promise to wake you if anything happens."
"Ok," I sighed. "But only give me a couple of hours." I crawled into the sleeping bag reluctantly, but quickly fell asleep with Peeta stroking my head.

When I woke up, I could tell it was the afternoon.
"Why didn't you wake me?" I asked Peeta, who was sat up against the wall next to me, just watching me sleep.
"You looked like you need it. Plus I like watching you sleep."
"Peeta your lips are dry, have you been drinking water?" I placed my hand on his cheek. "And you're burning up. Take these, no arguing." I handed him two more fever pills and then I stood over him as he drank two litres of water. Then I checked his burns and stings, which were healing well, but I still rubbed some more of my burn ointment into them. His leg was next. Opening the bandage I tried not to gag. There was no sign of pus, but his leg was swollen to three times it's size and there were dark red trails leading from the wound up his leg.
"It's not too bad," I said, biting my lip.
"Cora, I know the signs of blood poisoning," sighed Peeta, leaning back into the wall and looking up at the roof, his eyes closed. I sat back on my legs, and sighed.
"Ok, I'm going to fix this," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. I got some more water from the stream outside, added a couple of drops of iodine, then once it was ready, I used it to clean up as much blood from his leg as I could, then wrapped it in fresh bandages. "You need food." Peeta tried to argue with me, but I ignored him and went back out to make a soup. I debated about making a fire, but realised that would be stupid, especially with Cato so possibly close, but I needn't have worried. It was so hot that I realised I could use the hot rocks. The Gamemakers were trying to kill us with the elements by the looks of it - overly hot in the day time.
and freezing cold in the night.

~ Peeta's POV ~
Cora was trying to keep my spirits up, and I was grateful for it, but I honestly didn't think I would survive this. Even if we do win and the two of us are crowned victors, the both of us going home would be a stretch. My leg was too badly damaged and I didn't think I would be lucky enough to get any sponsors send me medicine. I never got any parachutes till Cora turned up, and what would have bought the medicine I need at the start of the Games, would only buy a cracker this far into it. She had gone outside to make something for us to eat. She may not know it, but Cora was a really good cook. Well, in the circumstances, anyway. I didn't know what she was like at home. I was lucky to have her. Except I didn't, did I? I think she was serious up on the roof back on the Training Centre, about falling for me hard. I thought I had fallen for her back in Twelve, and yes, I was playing an angle here in the arena, but I couldn't stop myself falling completely head over heels in love with her. No-one has shown me the love and patience that she has. I was just thinking about all of this, trying to sort my head out, when she came back in with a pot of hot soup.

"Berries and roots," she told me when I questioned it. I had to admit it smelt amazing and I didn't argue with her when she fed me. Mostly because I was still feeling pretty weak, but I had to admit there was a small part of me enjoying being taken care of. I was lying on top of the sleeping bag, in the shade, but I was still burning up. After my soup, Cora tried to cool me down by placing wet bandages on my forehead and cheeks, but they would get really warm within moments of touching my skin.

"Do you want anything?" she asked.
"No," I said. "Wait, yes. Tell me a story."
"A story? What about?"
"Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember," I smiled. She curled up next to me, and my stomach gave a little jolt.
"Something happy," she grinned. "Ok, well you know how we have our own vegetable patch next to our house?" I nodded.
"Yeah, dad buys your pumpkins and herbs sometimes. He says your mum grows the best arrowroot." She blushed.
"Thanks," she smiled. "We started it up when I was about four. Dad helped us plant everything. We didn't know what we were doing, but we somehow scraped by, and that first year, all we got were a few small potatoes, some carrots, and a small sunflower. Nothing else would grow. But dad encouraged Gale and I to put the time and effort into it, and over the next few years, we began to grow everything we have there today. The pumpkins were my favourite, and even now I love growing them. Gale says he doesn't know how I do it, but I can always get them to really grow, and I swear they get bigger each year!" I chuckled, although my mouth was already beginning to water. Roasted pumpkin was my favourite, but I never knew that Cora was the one growing them herself.

"Mum can get ten batches of pumpkin and seeded bread from just one of your pumpkins. When I was a kid, I used to help my brother Jasper pick the flesh off of the seeds that came out of it, and because it wasn't much use elsewhere, we would pile it up into a bowl, and eat it for lunch with a slice of bread."
"That sounds delicious," she smiled.
"It was. Sorry, this is your story."
"It's ok," she said, as I stroked the hair back from her eyes. "Well a few years ago, Gale and Katniss got Prim a little goat. It needed feeding up and there was a gash on it's leg, but Prim's like her mum; she's going to make a really good healer one day. I don't know how she did it, but a couple of weeks later, there was nothing wrong with that goat, she was completely healed. Gale had helped to heal her when he could, and I guess Lady had become attached to him, because that first year Primrose had her, we had to keep chasing her out of the vegetable garden." I chuckled at the thought of this goat escaping and wandering around the Seam, trying to find Gale.
"This one time though," she continued, "we were sat eating supper around the kitchen table and
heard a scuffling noise in the garden. Mum kept the little ones in the kitchen, while me and Gale went out to see what was going on. Right in the middle of the carrots was this raccoon. He was massive. I was about to go and fetch a broom to try and get of it, when something white caught the corner of my eye. We looked over and there was Lady, obviously having just escaped again and on a night time stroll around the Seam, looking for Gale again I presume, and she stopped, dead, when she saw this dirty great raccoon sat in the middle of what she seemed to think were her vegetable, judging by the way she was always eating from them. A second later however, she ran forward, head down and butted this raccoon right out of the vegetables. It rolled a few feet to the edge, but came back and tried to take a swipe at her. You should have seen it, I swear this thing was nearly as big as Lady herself, although she isn't very big as it is. A few more swipes later and I guess the raccoon realised it wouldn't be worth it, so just ran off in to the woods again."
"So this little goat saved your crops from a wild raccoon?" I laughed, as she nodded, grinning, her whole face lighting up.
I was about to open my mouth to say something else, when Claudius Templeman's voice came over the arena. The same voice that had informed us all of he rule change, which meant Cora had found me.
"Attention tributes. Tomorrow morning, there will be a special feast at the Cornucopia. Now some of you may be thinking about ignoring this, but this is no ordinary feast." I exchanged a look with Cora, who looked skeptical. "Each of you needs something. Desperately. Each of you will find a backpack marked with your district number at the mouth of the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing this offer, for some of you this may well be your last chance." The arena went silent and I looked over at Cora who had a look in her eyes.
"No," I cried. "You can't go. You're not risking your life for me."
"Who said I was going to?" she asked.
"So you aren't going?"
"Of course I'm not going, give me some credit. Do you really think I would run straight into a free-for-all with Cato, Clove, and Thresh? Don't be stupid." She helped me get back into bed, because the weather had come in again, it was getting really cold. "I'll let them fight it out. We'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and make a plan from there."
"You're such a bad liar, Cordelia Hawthorne. I don't know how you've survived this long," I grinned.
"And you won't be surviving much longer if you call me Cordelia again," she chuckled playfully slapping my arm. I grabbed hold of her as her hand made contact, and pulled her down into me. Her face was an inch from mine, I could see the detail in her brown eyes. The swirls of her iris, the way her pupils dilated when she was close to me. My mouth curled into a smile, and my breathing became shallower. I knew at that moment it was Cora I loved, it was Cora I wanted to be with when we got home to Twelve. There was a warm stirring in my chest that could only be helped by feeling her lips, her body, against mine. I needed her, and she must have felt the same way, because just as I lifted my head up towards her, she leant down and crashed her lips onto mine. I felt her sharp intake of breath, just like back up on the roof in the Capitol, and she pressed her body right into mine. I wrapped my arms tight around her, I wasn't going to let go now. When she moved away, she cupped my face in her hand and leant her forehead against mine.
"I love you," she whispered, so only I could hear.
"I love you too," I whispered back, our lips barely moving, so no-one else knew what was being said. "You promise you won't go tomorrow?"
"Peeta," she sighed, looking down at my leg. "Okay, I promise. You need to eat something though, come on. I'll go and get some water." She left the cave and I lay back down in the sleeping bag, smiling to myself. When she came back a few minutes later, she was mushing up some berries.
"What's this?" I asked.
"Sugar berries. Now come on, you need to eat, open up." I took the spoonful that she gave me.
"Sugar berries? I've never heard of them."
"Yeah they grow in the wild," she said. "Next one." As I swallowed the second mouthful, I
realised they tasted kind of sweet.
"They taste familiar, kind of, sugary, no sweet. Like syrup." As she pushed the third spoonful into my mouth, I realised what they tasted like. We had something called sleep syrup back home in Twelve. Parents used it for babies who were ill and needed to sleep. My eyes widened as I tried to spit the last mouthful out, but she pressed my mouth closed and pinched my nose I had to swallow. As I lost consciousness, the last thing I saw were Cora's eyes. They were full of regret, and a silent apology.
~ Cora's POV ~

Holding Peeta's mouth and nose so he would swallow the sleep syrup Haymitch sent, I felt so guilty. I saw the betrayal in his eyes, and I hoped he would forgive me when I brought his medicine back to him. Once he had passed out, I covered him up so he wouldn't get cold, then set about covering the entrance to the cave with more vines and rocks. I then set off for the Cornucopia, hiding under the same bushes that I had hidden under a few days ago when I blew up the Careers food. When I got there, pieces of cloth and barrel and even a few dried food items were still strewn across the grass, along with mud piles and holes. I grinned. I chewed on a few mint leaves while I waited for dawn, and just waited. Finally as the sun began to rise, a hole opened up at the mouth of the Cornucopia, and a table rose from beneath. Before I had a chance to think about what to do next, movement caught my eye, and I watched as Foxface darted out of the Cornucopia, grabbed her backpack, and ran. Damn it, why didn't I think of hiding in there? It meant she had the perfect escape plan too, because we were trapped. I was confident that we were all hiding around the edge somewhere, and not one of us would want to chase her down when we had the opportunity to get what we needed. She cost me time, however, because it was pretty clear I needed to get my bag next. It was so small, that anyone could just hook it round their wrist and run off with it. Without hesitation, I sprinted for the table. Years of growing up with younger siblings had heightened my senses, and I knew there was danger before I saw it. I ducked down and rolled as the knife whizzed past me, then I grabbed an arrow from the sheath and fired it right at Clove's heart. She moved just in time, but it punctured her left shoulder. Unfortunately, she threw with her right hand, but it was still enough to slow her down a little, to take in the severity of the wound, and pull the arrow out of her arm. I took this chance to run for the table, and as I pulled the bag towards me and wrapped it around my wrist, I turned to leave and a second knife skimmed across my forehead, right above my eyebrow, which sent a gush of blood down my face, blinding me, and into my mouth. As I was about to throw my own knife towards her, Clove slammed into me, pinning me to the ground. "Where's lover boy?" she sneered, nastily, sitting on my chest and pinning my arm with her knee. "Oh I see, you're gonna help him right? Well that's sweet. Want to blow him one last kiss?" I worked up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She looked furious. She was skimming the knife blade across my face, across my neck. I was panicking now. I needed to get back to Peeta, to give him this medicine, but I was in danger of getting my throat slit. I tried to bite her hand, but she grabbed hold of my hair and yanked it back. "Too bad you couldn't help your little friend," she snarled. "That little girl. What was her name? Rue? Well we killed her, and now, we're going to kill you too." I watched paralysed as she raised her arm, and stabbed the knife blade down towards me. But it never reached me. Clove was dragged off of me, and when I looked up, Thresh had her pinned to the wall of the Cornucopia behind me. "Did you kill her?" he demanded. "No! No!" Clove screamed. "I heard you!" Thresh slammed her hard into the metal. "No! Cato! CATO!" "You said her name!" I watched as he bashed her once more into the metal wall of the Cornucopia and then let go. She flopped down onto the grass, dead, her eyes still wide open, her neck snapped. He turned to me and I froze. "What did she mean? About Rue being your ally?" "Yes," I nodded. "I - I - we teamed up. Blew up the supplies. I tried to save her, I did, but he got there first. District One." "And you killed him?" he demanded. "Yes," I nodded, "I killed him. A knife through his heart. I buried her, in flowers. And I sang her to sleep." Tears sprung in my eyes. The memory was still painful. "To sleep?" he asked, gruffly.
"To death. I sang till she died." I wiped away more tears. "Your district, they - they sent me bread." He watched me, as though he wasn't sure what to do. "Just do it fast, ok Thresh?" I winced.

"Just this time, Twelve," he said after a moment. "For Rue!" Then he ran off with not only his backpack, but the one labelled "District Two" and disappeared. I stumbled to my feet, made sure I had my bag and ran back to Peeta as fast as I could.

Crawling back into the cave, through the little gap I left in the rocks, I opened the bag and pulled out the hypodermic needle inside. Without hesitating, I stuck it into Peeta's arm, and slowly pressed down on the plunger. I raised my hand to my head, feeling the blood, and then dropped it to my lap. There was blood flowing everywhere. The last thing I remembered was seeing a beautiful green and silver moth land on my wrist, before I passed out.

When I woke up, it was to the sound of rain falling heavily on my bedroom windows. I love that sound, it was relaxing. When it was stormy outside, and I was younger, Gale and I would curl up under my green blanket in the middle of the night, and just watch the rain hitting the glass. I wanted to stay where I was, wrapped up nice and warm, sleeping. My head was pounding though. I didn't know why. It could be the reason I was curled up in bed; maybe I had the flu. That was why I felt I had been asleep for a long time. I can feel my mum stroking my cheek and it's nice. I've missed that, so I leant into it, feeling the softness, her gentle loving touch. Then I heard a voice.

"Cora. Cora wake up." It's not mum, so I opened my eyes slowly, and as they came into focus, I realised where the voice came from.

"Peeta," I croaked, trying to smile.

"No, don't sit up," he said, softly. "Just drink this, slowly." He handed me the water bottle and as I sipped the water, I realised I was in the cave still and it was pouring outside. No, more than that. The rain was coming down so hard, it was as though it were a giant version of the showers back in the Training Centre.

"Peeta?" I croaked again, and his face came into view one more time.

"It's good to see your eyes again," he smiled.

"How long have I been out?"

"Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a scary looking pool of blood." Blood, that's what that metallic smell in the air was. "I think it's stopped now, but I would move very fast if I were you." I gingerly lifted my hand up to my head and found it heavily bandaged. This simple gesture left me feeling weak and dizzy, so Peeta held the water bottle to my lips so I could sip the water again.

"You're looking much better," I smiled, faintly.

"Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick. By this morning almost all the swelling in my leg had gone down." I look at him warily, waiting for him to start yelling but he doesn't.

"Aren't you mad?" I asked. "I tricked you, drugged you, lied to you, risked my lif-"

"Of course I'm not mad, you saved me," he smiled, that beautiful smile of his. "Thankyou." He leant down and tenderly kissed my forehead. My insides wobbled and smiled a little.

"Did you eat?" I asked him.

"Yeah, sorry. I gobbled down three pieces of groosling before I remembered we had to ration it." "No, no it's fine. I'm glad you've had something," I was lying on the sleeping bag, looking up at him, as he leant over me, his blue eyes trained on my brown ones. "I'll go hunting soon, see if the snares have caught anything lately."

"Not too soon, alright?" he said. "Just let me take care of you for a while first." He started stroking my head again and I closed my eyes, fall back to sleep for a bit more. It was evening when Peeta woke me up again, and the rain was still coming down. A clap of thunder and a flash of lightning lit the inside of the cave up for a moment.

"I saw Clove is dead," Peeta starts tentatively. "Did you kill her?"

"No," I said, shaking my head lightly. "Thresh. She had me pinned to the ground after I shot an arrow in her shoulder. It was Clove who threw the knife at me, slicing open my forehead. She was
taunting me about Rue, and Thresh over heard. Pulled her off of me and slammed her into the wall of the Cornucopia, snapping her neck. I thought he was going to kill me too, but he saved me, because I had looked after Rue." Fresh tears rolled down my face again, and Peeta held me until they stopped, his strong arms wrapped around me, keeping me safe from whatever was outside of that cave. I was able to sit up now without feeling dizzy, and I was so hungry. We looked at our rations; two pieces of groosling, a few roots and a handful of dried fruit.

"Should we ration it?" asked Peeta.

"No," said, shaking my head. "The groosling's getting old and the last thing we need right now is to be getting sick off of spoiled food." We split it into two piles, and although we tried to eat it slowly, we were both famished, so it was all gone in two minutes. Afterwards, I curled up back into his arms and fell back to sleep. He told me he would keep watch.

"Thanks to you and Haymitch, I'm feeling well and rested now," he said, nuzzling his chin on the top of my head.

Morning came around again too quickly, and the rain was falling harder than ever, if that was possible.

"Who do you think they are trying to flush out?" Peeta asked me, as we chewed on mint leaves to try and settle our aching, empty stomachs.

"Thresh and Cato," I said, trying to ignore the growling coming from inside my body. "Though I would prefer it if they just let them fight it out amongst themselves."

"What about Foxface?"

"She'll probably be holed up in her den somewhere safe. I've not seen her about anywhere, except when she was taking food from the Careers base camp, just before I blew it up. She must have been watching them a while if she figured out the path through the mines."

"So it's just us, Cato, Thresh, and Foxface left?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Peeta?" I looked at him tentatively, not sure of how I was going to ask this or where it would lead. "You said before that you have had a crush on me for a while. When did it start?"

~ Peeta's POV ~

"Peeta?" She sat up so we were facing each other. She was biting her lip again; she was really cute when she did that. "You said before that you have had a crush on me for a while. When did it start?" She caught me off guard, I wasn't expecting that. I turned to face her properly.

"Let's see," I said, trying to sound more confident than I actually was. I had spoken about her to Jasper, once I felt comfortable doing so, but I had never imagined I'd be having this conversation. At the very least, not in front of the whole of Panem. But it was just me and Cora now. No-one else was in the cave with us. I tucked her hair back behind her ear. "I guess it would have to be that day you came into the bakery, on the last day of the summer holidays. You had your hair in a bun, but some of it was trickling down your back. You were stood admiring the cakes, not knowing I was the one who'd decorated them. You told my dad they were beautiful, and he said that I was the artist in the family, not him. I was stood by the door, in the kitchen, and I saw the smile light up your face in surprise. Delight, I would have said. The next day, we were back at school, and you were seated next to me."

"I remember," she whispered, her voice cracking slightly. "I bought a chocolate strawberry cake that day."

"Your favourite," I smiled. "When Mrs Greenwood called your name, I couldn't believe it. In a good way," I chuckled. "Jasper says when I got home that afternoon, I was like a different person, but it took him months before he found out why."

"You spoke to your brother about me?"

"Yeah. Well, not at first, but he kind of noticed I was different when you were around." I could feel my cheeks blushing, but was past caring if Cora saw it.

"When did you finally admit it to him then?" She seemed genuinely interested in my story.

"That day you were sat outside with Ione. Yes, I did see you sat out there," I laughed, as she began to deny it. I poked her softly on the nose. "From that moment, I was completely enchanted.
There's been no-one else since."
"Well that's good," she grinned, moving in closer to me. My heart began to flutter like crazy, and I knew that right now it could only be tamed by holding her in my arms, breathing in her scent, pressing my lips against hers. Before I could move in to her, she had crashed her lips against mine and we were moving in unison, our bodies pressed together, my arms around her waist, her fingers in my hair.

~ Cora's POV ~
We had to untangle ourselves when the tinkling noise came from outside the cave. A parachute. I grabbed one of my knives and told Peeta to lay low, while I went out to find out what had been sent. To my surprise, there was the silver parachute, but it was attached to a large basket.
"Thankyou Haymitch," I croaked in relief. I took it back into the cave, to where Peeta was sat, wide eyed. "Don't worry," I told him. "We can eat today."
"Haymitch sent food?"
"Yeah, come on, let's have a look at what we have." We both gasped when we opened the lid. Inside was a feast - fresh rolls, goats cheese, apples, blue melon, and best of all, a large tureen of that amazing lamb stew on wild rice that I told Caesar was the best thing the Capitol had to offer. Not satisfied with just that, we had been sent plates, silver cutlery, and cream tinted cloth napkins, embroidered with the emblem for District Twelve. We were so hungry, but instead of digging in like savages, I made Peeta sit back while I rationed it up. I didn't know how long we would be here in this cave, so I wanted it to last. We each had a bowl of the stew and rice, with half an apple, a slice of melon and a roll, spread with goats cheese. We ate slowly, not wanting to cause indigestion, and after the last few days, our stomachs had shrunk. Afterwards, I leant back into Peeta, his arm round my shoulder.
"Open up," he smiled, as he put a piece of melon in my mouth. It was so juicy, and fresh. I leant up and kissed him on the cheek. We may have been in a rainstorm, trapped in a cave, surrounded by people who wanted to kill us, but right now, I had never been happier.
Chapter 20

Last night we had discovered Thresh was dead. I was glad in one way because it meant there was only Foxface and Cato left, but I was also feeling a little sadness. Thresh would have probably been our friend in Twelve, had we known him there. It also meant that Cato would have supplies and would be back to hunting us again.

"Come on, you need to eat something," Peeta told me, as he was dishing up the left overs of the cold stew and some bread with the goats cheese spread on top. He had sliced some apple up and placed that on top of the bread as well. It smelt amazing.

"Mmm, this is delicious," I smiled, biting into it.

"We make a goats cheese and apple tart at the bakery."

"Bet that's expensive."

"Too expensive for my family to eat," he said. "Unless it's gone very stale. Of course almost everything we eat is stale." That was a bit of a surprise. I always thought the merchant families were well off. Well, better off than us in the Seam anyway. I looked over at Peeta and he had pulled the sleeping bag up over him and curled up in a ball, snoring lightly. I couldn't imagine having to eat everything stale. At least the food Gale brings back is so fresh we only have to worry about it running away before we can eat it!

Somewhere during my watch shift, the rain stopped completely, and a beautiful bright moon came out, like the one at home, just before I left. If this wasn't a moon fabricated by the Gamemakers, then I had been away from home nearly four weeks. Realising for the first time properly that there were only four of us left in the arena now, I allowed myself to think about the possibility of actually going home. Seeing Mum, and Gale. Thanking Posy for the daisy she sent me. I wondered how she had got it to me, but it figured I would find out when I got home. I knew Gale hated all things Capitol, so would he move in with me? Would mum bring Posy, Vick and Rory? I sat back against the wall, absent-mindedly stroking Peeta's hair as I stayed on guard all night. I woke him early in the morning, so that I could grab an hour or two sleep.

"Should we eat before we leave?" Peeta asked me, when I woke up.

"Yeah, we better had. It's sunny today, so I can set up the snares again when we get out of the cave." I divided up the rest of the food and Peeta's eyes widened when he saw the large bowl of stew and rice I had given him.

"Well, better to do this on a full stomach than not," he grinned, polishing off the last of his meal. After tidying everything up, packing, and repacking the bag, we left the cave and set off for the woods again. After a couple of hours, it was so hot that we stopped for a drink, always on the look out for Cato or Foxface. We agreed to separate to collect the food - I would try and shoot something and Peeta would collect berries. I taught him Rue's whistle, so that we could keep checking on each other without having to leave where we were. I was just pulling an arrow out to put it in the bow, when I heard a cannon go off.

"Peeta," I screamed. I hadn't heard from him in a while so I was worried anyway, and this just didn't help matters. As I ran back to where he was meant to be, I saw his jacket, which had a large handful of berries on it. I rolled one around in my fingers, suddenly realising. I screamed again.

"Peeta!"

"What?" His voice behind me. He was wet, so I assume he had been down at the river.

"Oh my god, Peeta." I flung my arms round him. "I thought you were dead." I cried, pulling away, smacking him on the arm. "I heard the cannon and I thought you were dead."

"No, no, I'm fine," he said, in shock, pulling me in towards him and wrapping his arms tight around me.

"And I suppose it wasn't you who ate the cheese as well?" I said, pulling back again. His face turned to one of confusion.

"Cheese? No, I've been down by the stream collecting berries." He looked to where I was pointing, and saw the bitemarks in what was left of the goats cheese.
"Cora, that wasn't me, I swear." I believed him. We looked around the nearby bushes to try and find the culprit, and within moments, we came across Foxface. "I didn't even know she was following me," he said.

"That was her charm. She could have been following you for days and you wouldn't know. She's your kill, Peeta."

"What?! No! I was down by the stream, I was nowhere near her."

"The berries you collected? The ones in her hand? Nightlock. They kill you instantly," I said. Gale and Katniss had taught me about nightlock back in Twelve, while they were teaching me to throw knives and shoot with a bow. I bent down to scoop them out of her hand, but Peeta stopped me.

"What are you doing? You said they were poisonous."

"I know, but maybe Cato likes berries," I grinned, pouring them into a small pouch. "Come on, let's move off, so they can collect her."

~ Peeta's POV ~

Cora slipped the berries from Foxface's hand into a small pouch and we headed off for the lake, to where we knew Cato would be. As soon as Foxface's emaciated body was lifted from the arena, the sky went dark.

"Peeta, what is it?" Cora asked me.

"I dunno, about lunchtime I think."

"What are the Gamemakers planning now?"

"Not sure but it might might have something to do with that." I pointed at a pair of yellow eyes, peering at us through the darkness, following by a snarl, and the sound of large teeth snapping together. It looked like a giant dog, and as we stood there in fear, more appeared, one by one.

"Run!" I cried, and Cora ran towards the Cornucopia as fast as she could.

"Peeta," I heard her cry, and she ran back for me. "I'm so sorry, I completely forgot about your leg." She grabbed my hand and we ran as fast as we both could towards the lake and the Cornucopia. She helped me up the metal wall, onto the roof, and I helped to pull her up. As we got to the top and looked over, Cato was running towards us, in a dark, mesh covered, all in one body suit. He must have some pretty good sponsors to be sent that! He managed to climb up beside us and I saw his face was covered in blood.

"Cora, are you ok?" She was pale and staring at the mutt trying to jump up and kill us.

"It's her," she whispered hoarsely.

"Who?"

"Rue." I looked at the mutt trying to get Cora, and those big brown eyes hit me. The soft hazel fur. It was her. I looked at the others and saw Glimmer, the blonde with the beautiful green eyes; Thresh, the powerful dark mutt with the almost black eyes; Foxface, a copper colour with blue eyes; and right in front of me was her - the blonde girl I had killed at the start of the Games, the one who begged me to get it over with. She was already in so much pain from whatever Cato and Marvel had done to her, that I had no choice, but to end her suffering. I only hoped she could forgive me. Just before Cora could pull me back, one of the mutts jumped up and grabbed my bad leg. It tried to pull me down to the ground, where they would surely tear me apart, leaving nothing to send back to my family. The pain in my leg was unbearable, but I knew Cora was trying to save me as she finally managed to pull me free from it's grip and back onto the roof. I was screaming in pain. The infection had cleared up, but the pain was still there, and now this.

"I - I don't know what to do," she muttered frantically. "I could try... yes, I'll try that." I watched, tears rolling down my face, as she ripped her shirt off and tore one of the sleeves away from it. Rolling it up and tightening it, she tied it around the top of my leg and secured it with an arrow where the bite marks were, in an attempt to ease the blood pouring from my limb. "I don't know if it's going to be enough," she cried, through fresh tears.

"Cora it will be, I promise," I said, trying to calm her down. The mutts were still trying to jump up at us, so Cora stood up and began shooting at them with her arrows. She had one left, and was about to shoot it when Cato called out to her.

"Looks like it's just us now," he sneered, blood still dripping down his face. His arm was tight
around my throat. We all knew that if she shot him, I would go down too. "Go on, shoot," he said when he saw her aiming at him. "I'm dead anyway aren't I? I didn't realise it until now." He squeezed tighter as I tried to break free. "I mean let's face it, it was always gonna come down to me and you, wasn't it, I just didn't think I would be the one to go." I could feel my lips turning blue, I was slowly being asphyxiated. I know I have one shot to make it count. Cora was stood stock still, her body poised, ready to shoot her arrow. With what little breath I had left, I reached down to my leg carefully, wiped up some blood and made a faint X on Cato's hand, nodding slowly and gently to Cora, making sure she understood what I was asking her to do. She blinked twice, letting me know she understood, then raised her bow slightly, and shot it straight into the back of Cato's hand. He screamed in pain and pushed me away from him, so I used that time, that split second, to push him over the edge of the Cornucopia, down to the mutts. Cora ran over and grabbed my jacket sleeve, pulling me into her. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, she put her arm around my waist, both of us trying to hold me up.

~ Cora's POV ~
After I shot the arrow into Cato's hand, I reached over and pulled Peeta back. I was mildly surprised I had hit where I was aiming, but I wasn't gong to express that feeling, especially with so many cameras trained in on us at this point. It was the climax of the Hunger Games and the audience expected a show. We were certainly giving them one, too. Peeta pushed Cato over the edge, then half collapsed into me. I finally realised why Cato was wearing that strange suit. It was body armour. I helped Peeta to sit down and sat next to him, and over the next few hours, we could hear Cato screaming in pain, or the clink of his knife against the metal of the horn, or the dying wail of a mutt as he was able to stab it. His body armour protected him so well, that the mutts were having a truly difficult time killing him. Finally, we looked over the edge again, and I could see Cato silently pleading with me to just end it all. End it now. "Use your bow," Peeta told me. "I can't, my last arrow is holding your leg together." "Take it out. Yes I'm sure," he insisted when I opened my mouth to protest. I unravelled the bloody arrow from his leg - or what was left of it - and loaded it into my bow. Aiming at his eye, I let go and the arrow found it's target. Once the cannon fired, declaring him dead, Peeta sunk into me and I folded him into my arms. The darkness subsided, and the afternoon sun came back into the sky. "Come on, let's get down to the lake, try and clean some of that blood up before it gets infected," I said. We slid down the side of the horn and I helped him over to the lake. We were just scooping the fresh water into our mouths when Claudius Templesmith's voice came over the arena. "Attention tributes. The previous revision to the rules have been revoked. There will only be one winner. Good luck, and may the odds be ever in your favour." The arena went silent and I slowly stood up, my hand clutched onto the knife in my pocket. Turning to face Peeta, he opened his arms and looked at me with those puppy dog eyes, only this time, they were full of resolve. "Go on, do it." "No," I cried. "Cora, we both know only one of us can go home and let's face it, it's gonna be you. I don't have anything to go back to. You have your brothers and sister." "No," I said once more, dropping the knife straight on the grass, before he could say anything else. I pulled the pouch of berries from my jacket and walked over to Peeta. "What are you doing? Put those away?" he hissed, pushing my hand away. "Trust me," I said, trying to put as much meaning into my eyes as I could. I took his hand and poured some berries into it, then some into mine. "Together?" he asked. "Together," I nodded. "Okay, on the count of three then." He knew I wasn't playing about. If they couldn't have two winners, they would have none. "One."
"Two." He stroked the end of my plait as I looked up the cameras. Then we both looked into each others eyes.
"Three," we said together. We were just about to put the berries in our mouths, when a different voice came over the arena.
"Stop! Stop, stop, stop! Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present to you the winners of the Seventy Fourth annual Hunger Games!" It was Seneca Crane, the Head Gamemaker.
"Stop! Stop, stop, stop! Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present to you the winners of the Seventy Fourth annual Hunger Games!" It was Seneca Crane, the Head Gamemaker. "Cordelia Hawthorne and Peeta Mellark!"

I flung myself onto the ground and spat out as much saliva as I could, just in case any of the berries had made it past my lips. Peeta was doing the same.

"Did you swallow any?" he gasped. I shook my head.

"No, if I had, I'd be dead."

"I didn't think of it like that," he smiled, weakly. The hovercraft descended from directly above us and two ladders dropped. I grabbed hold of Peeta because I knew he wouldn't be able to hold onto the rungs of the ladder, even with the current keeping him in place as we rose. As soon as we were safely on the craft, three men in pristine white coats and surgical face masks whipped Peeta away from me, and a glass door slid swiftly between us.

"Peeta! PEETA!" I screamed, banging on the glass, as they set about working on him. I knew they were trying to save his leg, but I was still in defense mode, and everyone I saw was an enemy. I had to protect my district partner. I was so distracted with trying to save Peeta, clawing at the smooth glass, that I didn't see the avox boy standing behind me, patiently waiting with a glass of fresh orange juice. I finally caved in, my back against the pane, sobbing, when I noticed him standing there. He handed me the glass, then left the room. It was so clean, so pretty, that I put it down next to me and moved away slightly. I didn't want to sully it by touching it. It seemed completely foreign to me now. I turned back to see Peeta again and jumped back, startled, at the reflection before me. The girl in the glass looked like a savage, with mud and blood all over her face, in her wild hair. Her gaunt features and sunken eyes were something I had seen in Twelve at times. I raised a hand to my face and realized it was me in the glass. That was my reflection. As we landed, I watched with wide panicked eyes as they wheeled Peeta out, covered in wires and tubes. I was still banging on the glass and screaming for him when a flash of neon pink caught my eye. Effie. She can help, she can get them to bring him back. But before I could say anything to her, a needle jabbed me from behind and I lost consciousness.

I woke up in a room. The walls were yellow, the lights were soft and unnatural, there were no visible doors or windows, and there was a faint smell of antiseptic in the air. There were tubes coming out of me all over, my skin was softer, my hair was smo- What was that? I rustled my hand against my left ear again just to make sure, but yes it was true. They had fixed my hearing in my left ear. I moved my hand across to my eyes and saw they had removed all the burns as well, and my nails were smooth, straight, and uniformly neat. I was just starting to pull the wires out, to sit up, when someone came in and injected something into one of the tubes. I tried to argue, but I very quickly passed out again.

The next time I wake, I'm feeling so much better, my skin is porcelain perfect, and I have a little bit of weight added on to my bones. Not much, but enough. The avox boy who served me in the training centre was back, holding a tray of food and drink.

"Is that for me?" I asked him stupidly. He nodded and laid the tray on a little table next to me. He pressed a button which caused the bed to push me into a sitting position, then he gave me the tray. "Did Peeta make it?" He nodded again and smiled a little. Looking down at the tray on my lap, I saw a small bowl of the broth I had fed to Peeta in the cave, a tablespoon size portion of apple sauce, and a small glass of orange juice. Is that it? I wondered. Though after a few mouthfuls, I had to admit defeat. I wondered how long I had been out for my stomach to have shrunk so much. That last morning in the cave, I was able to eat such a large breakfast.

I don't know what happened from that time to now, but I had been in between waking and sleeping for a while, and then one day, I had woken up with no tubes or wires in me, and my skin was as perfect as it had been just before I entered the arena. I was wondering what to do next,
when the door opened and in walked a visitor. Three visitors.
"Effie, Haymitch, Cinna. It's so good to see you," I cried, running in Haymitch's open arms.
"Nice job, sweetheart," he whispered softly in my ear, and I didn't hear even a hint of sarcasm.
"Thankyou," I whispered back. I suddenly noticed there was someone missing. "Where's Portia? Is she with Peeta? Is Peeta ok?"
"He's fine," Haymitch said, determination in his eyes. "They just want to do your reunion live on air."
"Oh right, that's good," I sighed, relieved that he was still alive. "I guess I'd want to watch that too."
"Go on with Cinna, he'll get you ready." He kissed me on the head and Cinna lead me off, back to the pent house in the Training Centre. The hospital must have been miles under the building, because there were so many winding corridors, but Cinna knew where he was going. We got to the lobby, and I surprised by the quietness. The darkness was eerie, made even more so by the handful of Peacekeepers stood guard by the doors. My footsteps echoed around the room, and we were left to walk into the elevators, to ride silently up to the 12th floor. If it hadn't have been for Cinna's arm around my shoulder, I think I would have collapsed. When the doors opened, Venia, Flavius, and Octavia were stood there to greet me, squealing. They swept me into the dining room, where I was allowed a proper meal of roast pork, peas and carrots, and some soft rolls with a thin layer of butter. I asked for seconds, but Flavius told me no. They had been told not to let me eat too much, otherwise my stomach would get irritated. Just like when I first came to the Capitol - too much rich food at once and I could be sick. Octavia seemed to be on my side though, as she slipped me a second roll under the table when no-one was looking. After lunch, I was taken into my room, where Cinna left me with my prep team.
"Oh wow, they gave you a full body polish," Flavius said admiringly, as I stood naked in front of the full length mirror. Though all I could see was how skinny I had become. I was never well built anyway, coming from Twelve, but now I felt unrecognisable. Venia set the shower up for me, and as I walked in to it, I smiled a little. She had put the wild cherry setting on, she had remembered that was my favourite. Afterwards, I sat in a fluffy purple bathrobe, while they went to work on my hair, nails, and make up. I only half listened as the three of them babbled away non-stop about something, if I was honest, I was too worried about how Peeta was. I caught bits and pieces about where they were during important parts of the Games. "I was in bed." "I almost spilled my drink with shock." "I had just had my eyebrows dyed." "I swear I nearly fainted." Everything was about them, not the children dying in the arena. Thankfully Cinna came in not long after, with an unassuming yellow dress flung over his arm. My prep team left the room, so we could be alone. "Given up on the girl on fire then?" I joked.
"You tell me," he smiled, slipping the dress over my head. I noticed there was padding sewn into the front, to give my breasts a softer look, adding curves that hunger had stolen from my body. "Padding?"
"The Gamemakers wanted to surgically alter you, but Haymitch managed to convince them not to." He slipped my feet into soft leather sandals, then led me over to the mirror again, my eyes closed. I opened them and gasped in amazement. I was still the girl on fire, but in a beautiful, yet subtle way. The sheer fabric was bunched at my right shoulder, held together by a simple yellow flower. The silk slip underneath came down to my thighs, where as the sheer fabric on the top floated down to the top of my knees. There was yellow band wrapped around my waist, the edges of which sparkled slightly in the light. I was giving the illusion I was a flame on a candle, flickering softly and gently in the dim evening light. Without heels on, I looked like what I was. A young girl. Fourteen at most. I looked innocent, harmless. Everything Cinna did was calculated, deliberate, so I wondered what the reasoning behind this was.
"I was hoping it would be a little more, er....." "Sophisticated?" he offered.
"Yeah," I nodded.
"I just thought Peeta might like this one better," he replied carefully. Peeta? No this couldn't be about Peeta. This had to be about the Gamemakers, and a subtle reminder that the Games weren't
over yet, even though we were out of the arena. And beneath his reply, I sense a warning, a warning about something that he can't even say in front of his team. "It's time, let's get you down there."

We took the elevator down to the level where just a few weeks before, I had been training with twenty three other tributes. Now twenty two of them were dead. Normally the victor and his or her support team would rise from underneath the stage to be greeted by the audience for the three hour live show, looking back on their time in the arena. But there were two of us this year, so a rather hash job had been made of a poorly lit section under the stage, where I would be coming up from. A new metal plate had been installed just for me, I could still smell the sawdust. Cinna and the prep team left me where I was for the moment so they could go and get changed.

"Hey there, sweetheart," a familiar voice said behind me. I jumped slightly and turned around. "Haymitch," I smiled, I wasn't expecting you!"

"Come and give me a hug," he said. That was a bit of an odd request, coming from him, but I did it anyway. He pulled me close into him and whispered softly in my ear. "You're in big trouble. The Capitol are furious with that stunt you pulled in the arena. They don't like being laughed and right now, they are the joke of Panem." I felt dread and nausea coursing through me, but I chuckled as though Haymitch had said something funny.

"So what do I do?" I asked keeping my mouth covered. "Your only defence is that you were so madly in love with the boy, that you would have rather died than spend the rest of your life without him."

"But I AM madly in love with him, Haymitch," I insisted.

"That's a good start," he said, smiling and pulling away. I was seething. Why couldn't anyone believe that I have been in love with Peeta for as long as I can remember. Cinna and the rest of the team arrived back, ready for the stage, so Haymitch winked at me. "Good luck, sweetheart," he grinned. So many thoughts began to fly through my head. What would happen if we said something wrong? How will Peeta suffer? What about Gale, and Posy, and my brothers, and mum? The Hungers Games were the Capitol's weapon. The best weapon. Now I've shown them up, and I'm dreading what comes next. When I left the arena, trumpets were blaring, I was supposed to be safe for the rest of my life. That might come quicker than I thought now.
The Capitol's anthem blared out in my ears, and I felt the metal plate I was standing on begin to rise. Cinna squeezed my hand next to him and smiled as we rose up on to the stage. Hundreds - no, thousands - of people were gathered in front of the Training Centre, cheering and screaming for me. Cinna raised our arms in the air, and the crowd went wild.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Caesar Flickerman cried, "Cordelia Hawthorne, one half of this year's victors!" I walked over and greeted him like an old friend, throwing my arms around him and letting him kiss me on the cheek. One by one, my prep team were introduced, then Cinna, and lastly, Effie. I could tell Effie had been waiting a very long time for this. Her raspberry pink wig in perfect condition, her matching dress was immaculate with the skirt covered in fluffy flowers skimming out wide around her knees. She tottered over to Caesar and kissed his cheek, just as Haymitch arrived. His presence caused the crowd to clap and stomp and cheer for at least five minutes. Finally, Peeta was introduced with Portia and as I ran over to him I noticed he was using a cane.

"Peeta," I cried, flinging my arms tight around him. I was grateful for Venia putting waterproof mascara on me, because I couldn't stop crying as I held on to him. He clung tight on to me too, his face nestled into my neck.

"I missed you," he whispered, as he crashed his lips onto mine and shivers shot up and down my body, that warm stirring sensation in my chest getting stronger by the second. The crowd went insane as we heard Caesar clear his throat behind us. I pulled away and grinned, wiping my eyes gently to remove the tears. I gripped Peeta's hand and we followed Caesar over to the front of the stage. Normally there would have been a couple of chairs set up, but because there were two of us this year, they had set up a little love seat for us. Peeta was in a black t-shirt and a deep blue suit, his hair was gelled back and he had never looked so gorgeous, although that smile of his was the same one from the cave, the same one in Twelve, the same one that still makes my tummy flip like butterflies. I kicked my shoes off and curled up next to Peeta, resting my head on his shoulder, his arm wrapped round mine.

"Aww, don't they look fabulous!" Caesar tried to rouse the audience up again and they began cheering once more as Peeta squeezed my hand. Once they had calmed down, Caesar turned to us. "So, Cora, Peeta, are you ready?"

"Absolutely," Peeta replied, sounding a little less confident than he looked. This show would last exactly three hours, so we had a long night ahead of us. The first half an hour was focused on the reapings, the chariot rides through the Capitol, our training scores, and finally our interviews. I watched once more as Rue's name was called out in Eleven, as she stood alongside Thresh. I saw Cato and Clove's names were called out in Two, the slight disappointment shoot across Marvel's face as no-one volunteered for him in One. Finally came District Twelve. We saw Effie in her neon pink wig, Mayor Undersee sat with Haymitch, our friends and family. As the camera panned across the boys side, I saw Gale, his face in shock when my name was called, and the pale face of Peeta as he was called up. We smiled and made small talk, commenting on the Reapings with Caesar as we watched. Next came our chariot rides. I had forgotten how spectacular we had looked. I truly deserved the title Girl On Fire. As we chatted about our interviews, watching all those dead faces smiling in front of me, I wondered how Gale was right now.

~ Gale's POV ~

Curl up on my lap was Posy. It was long past her bedtime, but like the rest of us, she had been so worried about Cora since she left the arena. It had been two weeks and there had been no word until Caesar Flickerman's three hour show was announced yesterday. She was in a pair of Rory's old pyjamas; she had her own, but insisted on wearing these old brown ones. She said they were comfy and I wasn't going to argue with her!

"It's Cora. Kayle, look it's Cora," cried Pansy as our sister came on screen. "She is pretty. Just like me." I tried to suppress a giggle. Posy was still at that great age where modesty just wasn't in
existence yet!
"Do you want a dress like that?" I asked.
"Ooh yes please. But not today, I'm tired," she sighed. "Eewwwww they're kissing again. Yuck. I'm never kissing a boy when I get older, that's gross."
"And you should remember that," I grinned. Watching Cora curl up next to Peeta, I could see she was happier than she had ever been. She looked skinnier than I had seen her in a long time, but that was understandable. After the replaying of the Reapings, again, and the pre-arena videos, it was onto the initial bloodbath. I winced as Cora was almost hit with that knife, but I was just thankful Katniss had helped me train Cora of a sort. Most of the video was taken up by Peeta, how he was able to team up with the Careers, in an attempt to protect my sister. We watched as he lay awake most of the night while she was up in the tree. We saw Cora cry as he lay in the mud, dying, muttering her name.
"That's my present," mumbled Posy beside me. I thought she had been asleep, but she seemed to have woken up, just after Rue was killed.
"Right sleepy-head, let's get you to bed," I smiled, scooping her up and tucking her in to her bed, then going back to the screen to finish watching District Twelve's very own heroes. At the end of the show, they stood up for one more bow and Caesar reminded us all to tune in tomorrow for the private interviews. It wasn't as though we could forget, it was mandatory viewing across Panem.

~ Cora's POV ~

After the show, we were taken to the Capitol centre, to where President Snow greeted us just a few weeks before at the Tribute Parade. As we walked up the steps, hand in hand, the crowd cheered for us as wild as, if not more than, the crowd outside the Training Centre. We stood either side of the podium on the balcony and Snow stepped up to us, followed by a little blonde headed girl in a purple flower dress, who was carrying a crown on a plush red and golden cushion. We, along with the crowd, we confused; until Snow gave it a little twist and it split into two. He placed Peeta's crown on him first, smiling, but when it was my turn, he stood glowering at me for a moment before placing the crown on my head. His eyes were as unforgiving as a snake's, and I knew in that instant that, even though we both ate the berries, it was my fault. I pulled them out. I was the instigator.

"That's a lovely brooch," he smiled, moving my hair to the side and revealing my mockingjay pin, the smell of blood heavy on his breath.
"Thankyou, it's from my District," I replied politely, but looking him square in the eye. He smiled and nodded his head, then stepped back and greeted the audience.
"Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you this year's Hunger Games Victors!"

My ears were still ringing when we got back to the Training Centre. I was hoping for some alone time with Peeta, but he was whisked straight off to his room and I was taken straight to mine.
"Why can't I see him?" I asked Haymitch, who had delivered me to my door personally.
"There will be plenty of time for you two to catch up later, now go and get some rest, you are back on air tomorrow afternoon." Once he had shut the door, I peeled everything off and stepped into a hot shower, washing everything away before crawling into bed; falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. At about 5am, the sun shone through the window and straight onto my pillow, so I got up and decided to try and speak to Peeta, but once I pulled on the door, I found it locked. I suspected Haymitch initially, and cursed his name under my breath, but then another fear crept up on me. One that says the Capitol is still trying to keep control by monitoring me and confining me. I felt like a caged animal, but there was nothing I could do except crawl back into bed. I hadn't been asleep for long when Effie banged on my door telling me to "get up, up, up, it's another big, big, big day!" Rolling over to look at my clock, I saw it was now 10am, and groaning, I fell out of bed onto the floor, then crawled into the shower, lathering myself up in wild cherry foam and a hint of wild cherry moisturiser. My prep team were already in my room when I dried off and wrapped myself in a large fluffy bath robe, so I wrapped my hair in an equally fluffy towel and made to sit down with them.

"Nope, you need to eat first," Venia told me, so, still in my bath robe and towel, I was bundled off to the dinging room, where I was given ten minutes to wolf down a bowl of hot grain and lamb
stew, before being whisked back off to my room to get ready. I caught a glimpse of Peeta out of
the corner of my eye and was about to call out to him, but my door was shut and I was hustled
over to my bed.
"Cora," smiled Cinna, his arms wide open. I flew into them and he enveloped me in a hug. "It's
almost over, I promise, then you and Peeta can go home very soon."
"Thankyou Cinna," I replied, trying to stop the tears rolling down my face. I don't know why I
was so emotional at the moment. Probably because I just wanted to go home and see my family,
spend time with Peeta. He was across the corridor, yet we had never been further apart.
"Do you want to see today's outfit?" I grinned and nodded.
"Surprise me," I chuckled, gasping as he pulled out another beautiful, but simple creation. Venia
did my nails in a plan coating of clear varnish, Octavia put my make up on once again, and
Flavius set about working on my hair. Once I was dressed, I looked in the mirror, and once more
saw a young girl, rather than a young woman, like last night's dress.
"Once more thing before we go," Cinna smiled, and pinned my mockingjay badge to my shirt, so
it could still be seen, but so that my long hair, which was down and silky smooth, covered it up
when laid across my shoulder. "Right, it's time." We left my room, just as Effie came back into the
penthouse.
"Ah there you are," she grinned, "follow me, we have a room set up perfectly for you both." Then
she tottered away in her skyscraper heels once more, muttering to herself about all kinds of things
she needed to get done. I was grateful to have Effie. If she weren't here, I don't know where we
would be! We took the elevators down to the lobby of the Training Centre, which like last night,
was still eerily silent, except for a few Peacekeepers. Effie guided Haymitch and I into a room just
down from the main entrance which, when I looked out of the window, had a breathtaking view
of the gardens in the Training Centre courtyard. I could see roses, and tulips, and carnations, and
daffodils, and flowers I didn't have the names for; in every colour of the rainbow and more. The
little waterfall zigzagged down a small slope, ending in a clear pond full of bright green lilies,
frogs, dragonflies, and some large red and silver fish, which I recognised as a breed called
Firemouth. A few large goldfish were jumping about in the water aswell, adding the full colour of
the garden.
"Cora, welcome. How are you faring?" Caesar asked, giving me a warm hug.
"I'm ok thanks," I smiled, "though a bit nervous." I looked around at the room we were in. The
loveseat from last night had been brought in, and next to it was a table with a large bunch of red
and pink roses. A few camera had been set up in front of us, but thankfully no live audience this
time. We could be more relaxed, though still formal.
"Don't be, we're going to have a fabulous time," he grinned in that wide smile that only he could
have, his white teeth showing happiness at each one. He patted my cheek reassuringly.
"I'm not really that good at talking about myself," I admitted.
"Nothing you say will be wrong." I was about to reply, but the door opened, and Peeta was there
looking more beautiful than I had ever seen, and his midnight blue shirt, which was rolled up at
the sleeves, matched Caesar's suit exactly.
"I hardly get to see you," he murmured, pulling me in for a hug with his spare hand. "It's like
Haymitch is trying to keep us apart."
"I know, he's gotten so responsible lately," I chuckled, breathing his scent in deeply. He had had a
shower again this morning, I could smell the faint aroma of roses mixed in with his body scent.
"Well there's just this, and then we go home. He can't watch us all the time, can he?" A shiver
went down my spine and I smiled. All my spare time with Peeta. No more having to hang around
outside the bakery in the hope I get to glimpse him anymore. He pecked me on the cheek and we
sat down on the loveseat, in front of Caesar and the cameras. I kicked my yellow pumps off again
and wrapped myself into Peeta, curling up on the seat. Somebody counted backwards from three,
and then just like that, we were live on air to the whole of Panem. Caesar and Peta already had a
rapport built up from the first lot of interviews we all did a few weeks ago, so I just let them talk
for a bit, laughing and joking along with them, and giving short answers only, redirecting the
questions to Peeta whenever I could. I wasn't hiding anything, I was just shy right now.
"So Peeta, we know from the days in the cave that it was love at first sight. But when was first sight?" asked Caesar.
"A few years ago, when Cora had just left the bakery. She had told my dad how beautiful the cakes had been decorated and he told her I was the artist. I saw her glance over at me and something stirred inside me. I had seen her before at school, but hadn't taken much notice. I regret that now." He looked down at me and kissed me on the top of my head.
"Aww isn't that sweet," Caesar said, addressing the cameras. "But Cora, what about you. It must have been a roller coaster ride, the audience watching you fall for him. When did you realise you were in love with him?"
"I was always in love with him, but I was too scared to tell him," I blushed. "I guess I first realised I liked him when we were ten years old, and there was this class presentation we had to do. I was teamed up with Peeta and a couple of our friends, Ione and Yoren. We had to create a poster about our district and the role it plays in Panem, and Peeta did all the drawing. I was in awe, it was as though a professional artist had done it. I don't remember the full details, but I do know we both ended up in detention however, because we ended up in a paint fight, just mucking around, and as I threw paint at him, he just looked so happy, his eyes were alive and I knew that was because of me, if only for a little while. Though I didn't admit it out loud till much later."
"A paint fight?" chuckled Caesar. "That sounds like alot of fun."
"It was," I grinned. "Our teacher wasn't too impressed though!"
"I remember that," Peeta grinned next to me, squeezing my hand. "It took two days to get the paint out of my hair!"
"Oh I'm sorry," I grinned, stroking his cheek, as he pressed his lips against my fingers.
"So Cora," said Caesar, changing the subject, "just after Rue died, which was heartbreaking to watch the two of you, I'm sorry to bring it up."
"It's ok," I said.
"After she died, you received a package. Would you like to tell us about it?" I started blushing. "Well as I was crying, trying to get my head around Rue's death, a silver parachute floated down to me. When I opened it there was a fresh loaf of bread from the people of District Eleven. I can't be certain, but I believe they were planning on sending it to her, but I was given it instead. I want to thank them once again. It was a beautiful thing to do."
"I remember that," Caesar said. "It brought a tear to my eye, seeing that parachute. Was there anything else in there?"
"There was," I smiled. "A card with a daisy attached to it, from my little sister. That was the most precious thing to me, I still have it now." I pulled the card from my pocket. It was a little one, about the size of a small photograph, and the daisy looked a part of the card, as if it had grown straight from the front of the paper. It still looked as fresh as the day Posy had picked it. "I just don't know how she got it to me," I said.
"She gave it to me when I met her in your district. I bent down and promised her I would get it to you. I had to pull a few strings, speak to Haymitch of course, but it got to you." I looked over at Haymitch, who was uncharacteristically shy and blushing.
"Thankyou, both of you," I smiled, wiping away a tear.
"So let's get to what we are all wanting to know. What happened in the tree?"
"When I heard the rule change come over the arena, my heart leapt because it was at that point that I knew - I knew I could keep him."
"When Caesar started to ask us about all our injuries in the arena , about the burns, the wasps, the gashes; but it wasn't until the mutts that I forgot I was on camera. When Caesar asks Peeta how his new leg is working out, I turn to face Peeta.
"New leg?" I cried, lifting up his trouser leg to reveal the metal and plastic contraption in place of his flesh.
"You didn't know?" Caesar asked.
"No, I haven't had the chance to," shrugged Peeta.
"It's my fault, I used the tourniquet wrong," I mumbled.
"Yes, it's your fault I'm alive," Peeta grinned.
"He's right," said Caesar, "he would have bled to death otherwise. You saved him." He left me alone from that point, just talking to Peeta, as I said curled up, my face tucked into Peeta's shoulder. Until we got to the berries.
"Cora, I know you've had a shock, but I have to ask. The moment when you pulled out those berries. What was going through your mind?" I took a deep breath and turned back to Caesar. "I just couldn't bear the thought of being without him anymore."
"Peeta, anything to add?"
"No," Peeta shook his head. "I think that sums it up for the both of us."
"Thankyou," said Caesar. He turned to face the cameras, signing off and we were given the all clear. I turned to Peeta again.
"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.
"I wanted to, but, but we never had the chance," he sighed.
"I'm so sorry."
"Don't be. I'm alive, and I'm with you," he smiled, kissing me on my forehead and pulling me in for another hug.
Chapter 23

The cameras had been packed away and Haymitch was chatting to Peeta when Caesar clapped my elbow lightly.
"Cora, can I have quick word?"
"Um, yeah sure," I said, all kinds of things running through my head.
"The daisy. I sent it to you."
"What do you mean?"
"I promised your sister I would get it to you, so I personally made sure it was embalmed and put into the parachute with the bread," he murmured quietly, so no-one would hear him. I'm guessing so he couldn't get into trouble.
"Why?" I asked, before realising how rude that sounded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean -"
"No, it's ok, he smiled. "She just reminded me of a little girl I once knew. A little girl who is now all grown up."
"Well thankyou, you don't know how much it meant to me, seeing it in there." He smiled sadly, nodded his head and left.

Back in the pent house, I went to my room to pack, but discovered there was nothing. I met Peeta in the dining area and we both made our way, with Haymitch and Effie, down to the ground floor, where two cars, with blackened windows, were waiting to take us to the train station. I barely got to say goodbye to Cinna and Portia, but it's ok, because we will see them again in a few months on the Victory Tour. On the train, we sat down to dinner and watched the repeats of our interview, then I went back into my room I had slept in on the way here, to get changed into something plain and simple. I tied my hair back into a bun and put on a pair of loose khakis and a light blue shirt with a pair of slip on sandals, then went back out to sit with everyone in front of the television. Well I say everyone, Haymitch was tucked up in his room with some "refreshments". I had to give him his due, he had done well to stay sober enough to help us, so he had to have his treats again now. As the train stopped to refuel, Peeta and I took the chance to go for a bit of fresh air. We assured the Capitol workers that we weren't going far, and just enjoyed the freedom, the walk along the track, hand in hand.
"Cora can we talk?"
"Of course, you can talk to me about anything."
"I love you, you know that don't you." I wasn't sure where he was going but I realised I wasn't going to like it.
"I know, I love you too." I reached up and kissed his cheek.
"Well, I want you to know that I wasn't entirely sure about who I wanted to be with until we got into the cave. I mean I liked you, I always have done, but it wasn't until we were in the cave that I realised for certain that I truly loved you, that it was you I wanted to be with."
I felt sick. So he had been playing me since we arrived in the Capitol? He started to say something else but I cut him off.
"How dare you," I hissed. "How dare you play me like that. I thought you felt the same way as me."
"I did - I mean I do, but I -"
"No buts Peeta. I don't think I can look at you right now." I dropped his hand and walked back into the train, my head low, and locked myself in my room for the rest of the night, sobbing. When I emerged for breakfast the following morning, I held my head high. I knew we still had to put up the pretence of the star crossed lovers, so that's exactly what I would do - keep up the pretence. Back in Twelve, the cameras were everywhere and it looked like the entire district had come out to see us, to greet us at the station. We were escorted to the Justice Building, where we emerged to shouts and cheers. I spotted my family in the crowd, and wanted to run over right there and then to give them a hug, but I had to wait until the official ceremony was over and the cameras had left.
"I'll catch up with you later," I said to Peeta, kissing him on the cheek, and going back to my
family. I didn't care how upset he was, he had played me, but I needed to sort my head out before I made any decisions, so my first stop tomorrow would be to Ione's.

A couple of weeks later, we were sat in our kitchen in the Seam.
"Gale, are you sure you wont come?"
"Cora, I love you, but I don't want anything to do with the Capitol. Besides I'm nearly eighteen. I'm starting down in the mines next month. I have to stand on my own two feet at some point and this is a good time to start doing it."
"We'll be round the corner, you know that, don't you? And you know our door is open to you any time."
"I know," he said, wrapping me up in a big hug. Tomorrow I was moving into the house allocated to me in Victor's Village. Mum, Rory, Vick, and Posy were coming with me, but Gale was staying put. I was upset, he was my big brother after all and had been there all my life, but I understood.
"Cora, you ready?" mum asked, popping her head round the door.
"Yeah, just coming." I gave Gale one last hug and shut the door to my old home behind me. It was stupid really, I would be seeing him around still, it's not like we were moving to the moon. Opening the door to my new home ten minutes later, I couldn't believe how spectacular everything was. Because I had won the Games - along with Peeta - we had money every month for the rest of our lives. So much money that we could essentially feed everyone in Twelve, but we couldn't get started on that. We could afford the meat from the butchers now, although we still preferred the fresh game that Katniss and Gale brought home. I wouldn't be at school now, I didn't need to do anything anymore, so I had agreed with them both that I would go into the woods and hunt as best as I could while Katniss was at school, and Gale was at work. Sundays would still be their time however. I would stay out of the woods then, as Sundays would be the only days Gale has off.

My bedroom was on the second floor and I could see Peeta's front door from my window. I missed him so much, but I was still mad at him. He had moved in to the village a few days ago, but he was alone; his family had decided to stay behind in the bakery. I wanted to go and speak to him, but we hadn't spoken since the day we got back to Twelve. I didn't know what to say.

As time went on, we settled into a routine. We would bump into each other in the street, be polite, but nothing more would be said or done. It tore me up inside every time we did it, but the more it went on, the harder it became to change. I just hoped things would be ok for the upcoming Victory Tour.

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