The One Who Takes You Home

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Summary

Katniss and Peeta have been broken up for two years and she’s gone out of her way not to see him again. A chance encounter one week before his wedding has drastic consequences for everyone.

Trigger Warning: Infidelity; Inspired by catchy, campy and somewhat repetitive pop dance song (hey, it’s not Shakespeare, okay?).

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

The One Who Takes You Home

So one last time

I need to be the one who takes you home
Present

“You’ve been locked up in this house all week! You need to get up or we’re going to be late!” nagged Prim as she burst into Katniss’ bedroom, opening the curtains to lighten the room and disperse the shroud of darkness.

“Leave me alone,” Katniss whined into her pillow, trying to escape the sunlight. She heard Prim huff in exasperation.

“No, I’m not leaving you alone. You are going to get dressed like a normal human being and you are going to let me do your hair and makeup so you don’t look like a raccoon at the wedding.”

“I’m not going,” Katniss muttered, yelping loudly when Prim pulled the comforters off of her. Her sister crouched down and glared at her.

“Yes, you are! You RSVP’d and everything! What’s the matter with you?” Prim said, sitting down on the mattress next to her sister’s stubbornly reclined form. “You didn’t seem to be thinking about Peeta during the entire two years since you two broke up and now, when he’s right about to get married, you act like this? I thought you were happy for him?”

Katniss felt the vomit rise in her throat at Prim’s words. She had thought she was happy for him, too. When she’d heard the news that Peeta and Delly were engaged to be married, she’d tried to be overjoyed for them. He and Delly were one of those golden couples who would have a fabulous, romantic wedding, buy a golden house, have lots of golden kids, and live a life everyone would be jealous of. It was only fair that she be positive about the situation, seeing as she could never have made Peeta as happy as she knew Delly would.
“Overjoyed,” Katniss mumbled, rubbing her eyes as she sat up in the bed.

Prim narrowed her eyes, studying Katniss carefully. “You know, it’s normal for you to feel a little strange about him getting married. You were best friends, and then boyfriend and girlfriend for a long time.”

“Yeah,” Katniss said, clearing her throat, which was raspy from sleep. “Just a little strange, right?” She hoped that would be enough for Prim to give her a break and began turning back over, but Prim stood up, suddenly impatient.

“You know what? I’m not even sorry for you. You had him eating out of your hand for years and then, when he broke up with you, you didn’t even try to get him back…”

“I didn’t want him back,” Katniss countered, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, fumbling for her slippers.

Prim snorted. “Yes, you did! You didn’t speak to anyone for a month when it ended and you’re actually going to try to sit there and tell me that you weren’t even a little upset about it? Come on, Katniss. I’m not that dumb, and you aren’t that good at keeping secrets.” Katniss blinked as her sister actually stamped her foot on the floor like a child. “But no, god forbid you’d actually admit to being heartbroken over the fact that you had broken up with your first and only boyfriend. No, you never talk about your feelings. Hell, sometimes I think you don’t even have any feelings!”

Katniss winced again, her sister’s proclamation like a knife to her heart. How she wished that were true. “Why do you care so much?” she said tiredly, pulling a robe over her pajama shorts and t-shirt. “There’s been so much more of me to enjoy now since I gave up dating.”

As quickly as Prim’s anger had come, it dissipated, her expression melting into one of sadness and pity. “You’re my sister, that’s why I care,” she said gently. “And I don’t want to stare at that miserable mug of a face for the whole day!” Prim added, following Katniss to the tiny bathroom of their three-bedroom apartment.

“If I stay home, you won’t have to,” Katniss answered as she shut the door on Prim.

“There are seven million people invited to this wedding, and I’m not going alone!” At Katniss’ silence, she became shrill with anger again. “You are coming with me and that’s it!” she said with
a final slam of her fist against the bathroom door before Katniss heard her stomp down the hallway.

“Brat,” she muttered under her breath. But her sister did have a point. Katniss had had months to turn down the wedding invitation. Any excuse would have been sufficient, and no one would have questioned her. But she had been so sure of her feelings, so absolutely positive that she would be able to sit through the ceremony and wish her former friend and lover the best of luck in a new life that did not include her, that she’d accepted the invitation. It was the least she could do, since she was convinced that she would never have been able to give him the kind of life he deserved.

For one, Delly was beautiful. She was a slender but curvy blonde who took impeccable care of herself. She was also from a rich, intact family, not like Katniss, who only had one semi-functional parent since the death of her father and had stopped living paycheck to paycheck only when she’d finally graduated college and landed a decent job at the Department of Forestry.

No, Delly had had an idyllic upbringing, by parents who had managed to love her unconditionally without spoiling her. In fact, Delly’s perfection would have been completely unbearable if it weren't for the fact that she was also just a really good person. In all the years she’d known her, Katniss couldn’t recall one time she’d seen Delly wear a scowl, a look that was all but synonymous with Katniss. Delly always saw the bright side of things and in consequence, she drew people and affection to her like birds to a flower.

Katniss was her opposite in every possible way - taciturn, diffident at times, while somehow managing to be intimidating at others. How Peeta could have ever thought that he’d been in love with her was a complete mystery.

All of this played into her commitment to be as happy as possible about the union of two of her oldest friends, a coupling that, from the outside, was a match made in heaven.

It didn’t matter that Peeta had been her first everything - first friend, first dance, first kiss, first lover. It didn’t matter that, for a brief, insane period, she had almost imagined herself in Delly’s place, dressed in white and binding her life to Peeta’s. It didn’t matter that all her secret dreams had been with him. She didn’t deserve him. She had never deserved him. And it was only right that he found someone who did.

There had only been one small complication though. Prim didn’t know about Saturday. How could she? She wasn’t there and Katniss hadn’t said a word to her about it, even going so far as pretending, in her own mind, that it hadn’t happened. When he’d left her house the next day, she’d jumped in the shower, determined to wash the smell, the taste, and the memory of Peeta off of her skin.
But facing her day-to-day life, outside of the obligations of going to work and driving Prim back and forth to classes, had become close to impossible after that fateful night. She’d come right home each day afterwards and locked herself in her room, hoping that she’d find relief in the blissful oblivion of sleep.

But that night haunted her, even in her sleep, ensuring that, even to the bitter end, Peeta Mellark would leave his unforgettable mark on her:

1 week earlier

She should have grown out of Abernathy’s Place by now. It had been a three years since she graduated from college. Surely, there were haunts in Panem that were more appropriate to a young woman in her late twenties, places less divey than the pub run by the alcoholic, Haymitch Abernathy, who was well-known to every student who’d ever studied at Panem University in the last twenty-five years.

But Katniss came here anyway, not only because it was close to home but mostly because it reminded her of a time in her life in which she had almost been...happy.

She dropped her bag on the countertop, checking that it was clean, before leaning heavily against it. Haymitch rose from his perpetual perch on a rickety stool at the end of the bar, loping slowly towards her with an icy mug in hand.

“The usual?” he drawled.

“Yeah. Thanks,” she said moodily.

Haymitch clapped the mug under the beer tap, deftly filling it and leaving off the excess foam. “One Miller Draft.”

Katniss took a long draught of the cool beer, the carbonation prickling on her tongue. She usually didn’t nurse her cold drinks very long - she hated the taste of beer at room temperature.

“You’re never a ball of laughs but tonight, you’re in a fouler mood than usual,” Haymitch quipped, pouring vodka into a shot glass and tossing it back.
She scowled as if in confirmation, causing him to laugh at the irony. “Hey, you’re not the only foul goose tonight. One of your friends has been here for about an hour, staring at a coaster.”

“Haymitch, I’m really not in the mood for company,” she groused, wishing she had a coaster of her own to get intimate with.

“Well, I don’t know. Your boy is here. Or...your...used to be boy...ex...bah! You know what I mean. The one who used to be your boy,” Haymitch drawled out, his eyes bright with some kind of knowledge that Katniss didn’t understand. He flicked his head in the direction of one of the booths. Katniss’ breath got stuck in her lungs when Peeta looked up at exactly the same time she glanced over at him. Her instant reaction, to slink out of the place unseen and run all the way home, was thwarted by his having seen her. A wave of shock washed over his face too, followed by a flush of color to his cheeks, a look that never failed to disarm her.

“Dammit, he’s seen me already,” she muttered under her breath, but loud enough for Haymitch to hear her. He laughed, and Katniss glared at him.

“Now don’t go looking like you want to stab me, sweetheart,” he said almost gleefully. “You might as well just head over and say hello. I’ll bring your refill to his table.”

Now it was her turn for her face to flush, then become pale at the thought of talking to Peeta after avoiding him for so long. However, it would have been unbelievably rude, she knew, especially when he’d just waved politely, to simply turn around and walk out the door.

“Okay, just one beer. Oh, and spot him one on my tab too. Might as well celebrate the impending nuptials,” she spat, sounding bitter even to her own ears.

“Oh, the sincerity,” Haymitch chuckled wryly as he pulled a tray out. “I’ll have those drinks over to you in a minute.”

Katniss stood up, smoothing down her clothes self-consciously before walking slowly towards him. Peeta’s eyes were glassy, evidence that he was well into his drink but nothing could dampen the deep blue color that she’d spent most of her life staring into. When he smiled, indicating towards the bench before him, her mouth went dry. She’d forgotten the effect that smile had always had on her, time having mercifully clouded the memory of it in her mind.
“Hey!” she said with false enthusiasm, observing a shadow passed over Peeta’s face as she took the proffered seat. He could always tell when she was lying.

“Katniss, wow, you haven’t changed at all,” he said, his words slow and deliberate, his eyes flashing in a way that Katniss knew meant he was calling her out. Perhaps she had underestimated how much he’d already had to drink.

“Neither have you,” she said airily, surreptitiously taking in the rolled up sleeves of his dress shirt exposing his muscular forearms, the golden curls that peeked coyly above the opened buttons. Katniss sat awkwardly for several moments, trying to acclimate herself to his presence again. She had only to think of the last time they’d seen each other, the bitter way they’d fought, to realize how incredible it was that they could sit so impassively in front of each other now. Her heart, which had dropped when she first saw him, suddenly sank further into her stomach when it occurred to her that not enough time had passed to make her immune to him.

Just as the tension became unbearable, Haymitch appeared to deliver the refills. “Courtesy of sweetheart here,” he said before taking away the empty glasses that had piled up before Peeta.

“Sweetheart,” Peeta repeated quietly, and Katniss knew exactly where his mind had flown. It was what Haymitch had always called her when they came here together, years ago, when they had still meant something to each other. Katniss cleared her throat, trying to dispel the heaviness in the air.

“I didn’t think I’d see you again in this dump,” she joked lamely, suddenly wishing she could crawl under a table and drop through the floor. She struggled for another thing to say and decided she might as well get the worst over with. Lifting her glass, she said, “Congratulations on your wedding. It was…it was nice of you to invite us. Prim loves to get dressed up.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” Peeta said flatly, staring at her with an expression so intense, she lowered the glass, squirming in her seat. “You know how Delly is…the peacemaker, the smoother-over. She loves everything to be very civilized and, well, she considers you her friend.” Katniss swallowed, a feeling that she was drowning growing with every passing moment. He hadn’t wanted her at his wedding. Somehow, that held more punch than she would have expected.

“Why wouldn’t we be?” Katniss floundered out. “We never fought. You got together with her way after…” here her voice faltered but just barely and she hoped he hadn’t noticed. “…after things happened.”

“After things happened,” he repeated quietly, lapsing into another uneasy silence, his eyes becoming unfocused. He took another long drink of his Guinness until it was gone, pushing the
empty mug away. “I never come here, actually,” he said abruptly. “And after today, I probably won’t ever come back here again. I honestly didn’t think I would see you, even though…” he trailed off, shaking his head, as though trying to rid himself of a bothersome fly. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, grabbing a paper towel as an after thought.

Katniss took another drink, just to give herself something to do, the silence between them stretching on for a long while before she worked up the courage to speak again. Soon she was on her second drink, then her third one, the alcohol having the effect of relaxing her. She asked about his father, who had always been kind to her, and his mother, who had not. Peeta obliged, responding politely to her attempts at small talk, laughing at the right moments, each one playing their part to perfection until, without warning, he put his large hand over hers.

“I’m so sorry, Katniss,” he said, his speech slightly slurred, but full of anguish. She discreetly flagged Haymitch down and asked for two tall glasses of water. Even though she felt light-headed herself, she knew exactly what he was referring to.

“You did what you had to do, Peeta. I couldn’t… I couldn’t give you what you wanted,” she said quietly, pulling her hand out from under his, though it had felt so impossibly good to feel him against her skin again. She reminded herself that she shouldn’t feel that way.

Peeta frowned at her, contemplating something with a thoughtful expression. “Maybe… or maybe I just didn’t see it for what it was. I was so hung up on you moving in with me…”

“You’re getting married in less than a week,” Katniss reminded him sternly, even as her heart pounded with his words. “And Delly is… Delly is amazing. Anyone would be happy to be with her. Don’t say stupid shit you’ll regret in the morning.”

Peeta flinched as if he’d been struck. “You think I’m drunk, don’t you,” he hissed angrily. “Well, I might have had a little too much to drink but I guarantee you, I’m not drunk. I know exactly what I’m saying to you. I fucked up and I’m so damned sorry. If only...”
Katniss clenched her fist, so hard the nails dug painfully into her palm. She didn’t want to hear this. She didn’t want to feel this much anymore. It had hurt the first time, and it would just hurt again. “Don’t say it,” she said, though a quiet desperation started to well up in her heart as she gathered her things together to leave, a need to run welling up within her. “It’s in the past now.”

Peeta shook his head, collecting his phone and keys also. Katniss threw him a furious glance. “What are you doing?”

“The least I can do is make sure you get home safely,” he said with a determined expression, and Katniss knew it was futile to argue with him.

They walked along the darkened sidewalk, each wrapped in their respective thoughts. Katniss’ heart pounded in her chest despite the fact that they were walking at a leisurely pace. Peeta’s words ricocheted off the corners of her mind, throwing her carefully constructed reality of the last two years into disarray. She never thought she’d see him before the wedding and certainly hadn’t expected him to apologize to her. She had been the one to refuse a commitment. She had been the one to deny him when he suggested they move in together, forcing him to make his decisions. Given the number of years they’d been together, there had been no reason for them not to progress. Except that she’d gotten scared and refused to admit it. She’d only told him that she wasn’t ready. She could still see the confusion and hurt in his eyes the day she’d said no, his question of why going unanswered...and now here they were, walking along a lonely road to the small apartment she still shared with her sister, just days before he was to be married and start on the path in his life that she would not be able to walk along with him.

When they reached her front door, Katniss was so nervous, she felt ill. There was a finality to the looming door, on the other side of which would be the rest of her life, with all its solitude and responsibilities. She’d have to go through one side and leave him on the other and the thought of it brought a fit of tremors so powerful, Peeta stopped her.

“Are you okay? You’re shaking like a leaf.”

The sight of him before her, his concerned eyes still radiant even in the feeble light of the street lamp overwhelmed Katniss. Suddenly it was as if the two years absence had never happened. For one moment, he had felt regret and even someone as allergic to excessive emotion as she was had seen it.

“I’m fine,” she said shortly. “Do you...do you want to come in? For coffee? Or tea?” she asked, unable to put her thoughts in order, knowing only that he needed to come inside with her.

Peeta’s eyes blazed in the dark, running over her face, a parade of expressions in quick
succession altering his features until he was a mass of conflicting emotions. He finally nodded, following her as she unlocked the door, letting them inside the corridor that led to her apartment. She felt his eyes bore into her back as they entered quietly. Katniss listened for sounds of her sister but there was nothing but silence, the low hum of the refrigerator motor vibrating through the apartment.

She made her way to the kitchen, searching for the light switch when she stumbled on Prim’s shoes. Peeta, who’d been behind her, bumped against her back. The contact made her jump, and she whirled around to face him.

She found herself before him, his nose mere inches from hers, his breath, tinged with Guinness and lemon water, bursting over her face. The wall of forgetfulness that she’d forged over the past two years crumbled, allowing the memories of every moment of their shared lives together, each prick of pain, each hymn of joy to rush in like an overrun fjord. She didn’t care if he had Delly in his heart. It suddenly mattered very little to her that he would soon be the other half of a married couple. She wanted to wake up next to him.

Just one more time.

Katniss’s hand grasped the lapel of his jacket and pulled him to her, pressing her lips against his. It was as if he’d never gotten angry, never left. They’d never argued or said the words they’d said to one another. It was just the two of them in the same kitchen, a little older, somewhat more complicated and just as much in need of each other as they’d ever been.

Peeta froze at the initial contact but quickly reacted, grasping her head with both hands. A small sound deep in Katniss throat reverberated through the silent room at the feel of his warm hands on her, a sound he complimented with a low growl of his own. They kissed until their lips were swollen, their hands frantically pawing at the clothes that separated one from the other.

“Not here,” she whispered, suddenly paranoid that her sister might find them. They stumbled to her bedroom, drunk on beer and the anticipation of each other. When she shut the bedroom door behind her, they wasted no time in shedding the clothes that had proven so cumbersome earlier.

It had been ages since Katniss had been naked with a man. There had been a brief tryst with a fellow forest ranger named Darius but that had fizzled from neglect, mostly on her part. Yet the alcohol made her bold and soon, she was straddling Peeta on her bed, her hands and mouth frantically covering his skin.

“Katniss, god, I’ve missed you,” Peeta moaned as he gripped her hips, lifting her over his waiting erection and sheathing himself inside of her. There was a heated desperation to their
union, not because it was unfamiliar, but because their bodies remembered each other and called out to each other, desperate to close the chasm of time and space that had separated them.

She cried out his name loudly as he snapped his hips upward, hurtling into her, clutching her to lift and lower her. She felt the bruises form from his strong fingers digging into her skin but didn’t care as she leaned forward, leveraging her body with her arms, meeting him as he crashed upwards into her. Their rhythm changed as he tired, her hips sliding, grinding, gyrating over his. He cupped her breasts, pulling her towards him to nip and suck on them until they’d become taut with need.

Katniss rode him furiously, the sweat gathering on her brow and neck. Peeta stopped, pulling her down and kissing her, a long, luxurious kiss before he flipped them over, resuming the frantic pace she’d set, plunging deeply inside of her. His eyes were like molten metal, blue fire alight with that intensity he’d had whenever he’d taken her roughly, as if he couldn’t get close enough to her. It was no different at that moment, when he slipped his arms beneath her knees, pressing them back to her shoulders. Reaching between them, he flicked his fingers over her clit, sending shards of sharp electricity over her nerve endings.

A look of pain crosses his face - he was readying himself for his own release - she knew him too well. She felt herself fall apart, her own surrender gripping her, forcing his name out of her chest. It bowed her back, causing her fluttering walls to draw him in. Grunting loudly, Peeta slammed down into her several more times until he finally gave in and emptied himself inside of her, his body shuddering from the exertion.

He dropped his head, leaning on his forearms to keep from crushing her. As they returned to themselves, it dawned on Katniss what they’d done, a realization that came to Peeta at almost the same time. Guilt marred his features as he rolled onto his back, staring at the same ceiling fan that he’d stared at so many times in the past.

Katniss, who’d seen that look before, in completely different contexts, placed her hand over his chest. “I’m sorry,” she said, though she knew she didn’t sound apologetic. But then again, she hadn’t just cheated on her fiancé mere days before their wedding.

Peeta brought a hand up to tug on his curls. “Fuck!” was all he said, but that one word told her everything, and as he sat up, she had to repress the desire to pull him down again and pin him next to her. Instead, she withdrew her hand from where it rested against his chest and turned her back to him so she wouldn’t have to see him getting dressed. As he searched the room for his clothes, she couldn’t help but feel like a fool. She hadn’t bound him to her at all. It wasn’t two years ago, when, as Prim constantly reminded her, she could have fought to get him back. Instead, she’d only delayed him for a time and the idea of it brought tears to her eyes, tears she furiously wiped away.

Therefore, she was caught by surprise when the mattress sagged next to her again. His fingers
splayed through her braided hair, which had become partially undone. He pulled off the green band that held it in place and stroked the long hair until it lay over her shoulders. Katniss was resolute in not looking at him, fearing he’d see her tears and let them influence him. She couldn’t compete with what he had with Delly. It had been an act of desperate selfishness on her part to bring him to her bed.

“Katniss…Please look at me,” he said, the pain and longing evident in his voice.

She shook her head, hoping he would not force her into a long conversation. It was no use and words would only make it all hurt more. She had only one thing to say, and then she would let him leave so she could deal with her heart, which was painfully and loudly preparing to snap in half.

“Just go and be happy, Peeta. There’s nothing here for you anymore.”

Peeta’s hand froze, his breath hanging still in the air between them. She felt the hurt vibrating as the sound of her words spread through them both, the implication so powerful, she almost called them back to her. But for what? His life was already set. He’d marry Delly. He’d move beyond this hiccup, and it would be the best thing for him.

Without a word, he stood and like a man limping from a mortal wound, plodded heavily out of the room and down the hall. She waited for the tell-tale clicking of the lock as it fell into place and strained her hearing as his footsteps faded until they evaporated in the pitch black silence of night. Then, she began to cry.

XXXXX

Katniss splashed icy water on her face, trying to force the obsessive, persistent memory away into the deepest recesses of her heart, where she held all her dearest secrets. He’d be married in just a few short hours. The wedding cancellation hadn’t come, though Katniss couldn’t be sure if that was even something she should have hoped for. She looked at herself in the mirror and only saw a thin, olive-skinned girl with nothing to her name of any value except for her sister. When she compared herself to others, she always came up wanting. No, it was better this way, no matter how much it destroyed her.

She opened the door to the bathroom, calling out to Prim. “Alright, little duck. I guess we have a wedding to go to.”
Katniss arrived at the church, purposely making sure that she was not too early so she wouldn’t be forced to circulate. It was a gorgeous cathedral, one of the oldest in Panem and in very high demand as a wedding venue. She wasn’t surprised that Delly had been able to get on the wedding schedule, considering the influence her family held in the city. It was rather too large for her own taste, the soaring buttresses and stained-glass windows intimidating her with their cold aesthetic, but even though Katniss felt miniscule before the imposing building, she could not deny its beauty.

Prim followed her as she made her way through the clusters of guests, muttering a constant refrain to herself, *I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.* She took a deep breath, leading her sister over to where Gale and Madge Hawthorne stood chatting cheerfully with Johanna Mason, all of them friends since grade school. Couples, everywhere couples, and then there was Katniss, decoupled by fate and design.

“Catnip! Prim!” Gale said, hugging Katniss and Prim both before handing them off to Madge and Johanna. “I saved a pair of seats for you.”

“Yeah, and if you want, you can drive with us to the reception afterwards,” Madge exclaimed happily.

“Thanks!” Prim fairly jumped in place, her radiant expression giving away her excitement, and Katniss was not so sorry to have made this sacrifice for her. She plastered the smile she’d been practicing all morning since she’d woken up, nodding politely as the women discussed the decorations, the rehearsal dinner, and the members of the wedding party. All the while, Katniss continued her private mantra.

*I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.*

She almost believed it until Johanna cast her a sly glance and stepped closer to her.

"This has to have been the most dramatic fucking run-up to a wedding that I've ever seen," Johanna whispered to her.

Katniss, who was in a daze, repeating her mantra in her mind, snapped to attention at Johanna’s words. “How’s that?”
Johanna shook her head. “Well, Peeta and Delly never fight, you know? Like, it’s unnatural how even-keeled their relationship is. Sometimes I wonder how they don’t get bored of each other…” Johanna paused, her eyebrows quirking at the thought, before focusing on Katniss again. “Anyway, they had this massive blow-up this week, from what Delly’s brother said. He told me Dell was screaming at Peeta for hours out by her parent’s shed, and they were this close to calling off the wedding.” Johanna pinched her finger and thumb close together to indicate a tiny space in between.

“And of course, I asked Delly about it. I was concerned…” Johanna continued with the air of one who wasn’t really concerned but just wanted gossip. “Delly wouldn’t spill any the details but I’ve never seen her so pissed off in all my life.”

As Johanna spoke, Katniss had become more and more tense until she thought she might shatter if someone touched her. There was only one thing that could have been bad enough to derail a wedding of this size, and Katniss was almost positive it had to do with what had happened between her and Peeta. Her chest felt like an arrow had pierced it, and she could barely breath.

“That’s...that’s just...wow…” Katniss stuttered, unable to formulate a coherent thought. This ceremony, which already loomed like a nightmare before her, became insurmountable and her mind raced with different scenarios, from her having a panic attack to Delly seeing her in the audience and beating her repeatedly with the bouquet. She suddenly questioned the wisdom of staying, her mind searching desperately for an escape that would save face for everyone.

“And to make things worse, it was Peeta’s idea to cancel everything!” Johanna continued. “Delly just said he had the worst case of cold feet but she persuaded him that they could go to marriage counseling after the wedding.” Johanna fanned herself, plastering on a false smile and waving at people from afar as Katniss hung on her every word. “Makes you wonder if it’s even worth getting married if the first stop on your honeymoon is your therapist's office.” Johanna glanced at Katniss, her face creased in sudden worry. “Hey, Brainless, you look pale. You want to sit down?”

Katniss swayed on her feet and opened her mouth to answer when, at the entrance of the church, the bridegroom appeared. It was a cliché but all heads turned to watch Peeta as he greeted guests at the door. Even Johanna forgot her concern for her friend at his appearance, muttering under her breath in appreciation. He wore a crisp, classic tuxedo that was clearly custom-made for his firm body. His hair was styled to perfection, sweeping upwards and away from his brow, calling to mind movies like The Great Gatsby, where all the men were as pretty as the girls. He wasn’t just beautiful or desirable. He was radiant as the sun. When he glanced in her direction, there was no one to draw his attention away. He couldn’t have possibly missed her, and she had nowhere to hide.
That night, which had taken on the dimensions of a hallucination, rose up between them, the memory clear in his brilliant blue eyes. Katniss recalled Johanna’s words as a flicker of shock at her appearance followed by a flash pain raced across his features. Like a man in a trance, he began to move towards her.

Fear and pain flooded Katniss’ body as she mentally berated herself. She’d been a fool. A self-delusional, masochistic, immature, ridiculous fool. She’d almost ruined a marriage before it had even started because she was feeling nostalgic for something that was once hers and she had so carelessly thrown away.

*I can’t fucking do this.*

Katniss cast a glance at Johanna, her sister, Madge, Gale and everyone else who appeared so happy and lost in conversation, before looking back at Peeta, now pressing his way through the crowds. He paused every now and again to politely acknowledge those who stopped him to give him their good wishes. But he continued to make his way towards her.

She backed away slowly, noting the entrance just behind him, realizing she’d have to pass him by to get out. She searched frantically until she saw a smaller side entrance along the ambulatory of the church. Like a gazelle, she raced quickly toward that exit into a clear spring day that was quickly becoming overcast with thunderous rain clouds. Not heeding the people milling about outside, the cars searching for a parking space, the traffic that was completely ignorant of her heart’s predicament, she ran as fast as her heels allowed. She paid no attention to the distance or the time until she’d practically stumbled up the stairs to her apartment, barreling through the door and not stopping until she threw herself onto her bed, letting miserable sobs finally have their way with her.

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There was a perverse satisfaction in hearing the sky open up and pouring down rain like Noah’s flood. Katniss’ only regret was that it hadn’t been an outdoor wedding. The angry thunder and fierce lightning splitting the sky matched Katniss’ mood completely, but her ungracious satisfaction was quickly followed by guilt, making her feel even worse than she already did.

She’d managed to peel off her dress, a smart, sleeveless, green shift that wrapped itself around her slender figure like ivy on a tree trunk. It now lay in a discarded pile at the foot of her bed together with the matching bag and pumps. She’d scrubbed off the makeup her sister had so carefully applied until her skin glowed pink from the friction, then slapped on moisturizer, more out of ingrained force of habit than any desire for beauty.
Every muscle ached but she knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep. Even the bed was a curse, since she still had the lingering memory of Peeta to torture her throughout the night, taunting her with what she could not have. Instead, she went to the kitchen to set the kettle to boil, preparing a cup of tea.

She’d been an ass. A complete and perfect ass. She saw that now. And it only reinforced the fact that she truly deserved nothing good.

She and Peeta had broken off because of her commitment issues, but it was only now that he was no longer a possibility that Katniss realized how utterly superficial that break-up had been. He’d rooted himself deep within her soul and had never left. She had only thought she could move forward without him because, in the secret places of her heart, she had reserved the hope that somehow, they’d find their way back to each other.

Even when she’d sent him away a week ago, she still labored under the delusion that he would overcome the greatest obstacle to their happiness - herself. It wasn’t until she’d seen him in the church that morning, on the cusp of marriage, that she realized the finality of her hopes, kept secret from even herself. It would be irrevocable this time and now that it was, she realized too late how much she did not want it to be.

She hadn’t been careful enough or aware enough of the love she’d had with him. Now, she would sit in the wasteland of her life, counting up all the chances she’d been given to be with him and had carelessly squandered.

The pounding rain on the roof and gutters made steady, morose company as she sat curled on the sofa, watching the clock as time tick by.

11:50 am.

They’d been married for almost an hour. She cast a look around the quiet apartment, its emptiness looming around her like a cave, the air suffocatingly warm, making Katniss feel like her body was aflame with the pain of it all.

_Congratulations and welcome to the rest of your life._

She was almost tempted to take a sleeping pill and find relief from this agony but she thought of her mother and the often unresponsive state of her depression and swore off the medication, choosing instead to immerse herself completely in her soul’s mourning.
Katniss eventually dozed off, listening to the heavy pitter-patter of rain as if the world were drowning in sadness together with her. She noted the way the sound became sporadic, more insistent until she realized it wasn’t the rain pounding on the building any longer but a sustained series of knocks on her door.

Sighing heavily, cursing herself for not locking the front door and praying that it wasn’t a Jehovah’s Witness, she peeked through the hole in her door. She had to blink twice, switching eyes to be sure that what she saw was true and not just a cruel figment of her imagination.

Yanking the door open, her vision was confirmed. Peeta stood, soaking wet, in his wedding tuxedo, the perfect upward sweep of his hair having transformed into a flopping fringe of curled hair pressed against his forehead.

“Peeta!” Katniss exclaimed, unable to do any better than babble helplessly, “You...but..aren’t you...what??” She clapped her hands over her mouth to keep more nonsense from tumbling out.

“I canceled the wedding,” he said, breathing heavily as if he’d just ran a hundred miles to get to her.

“What...Why? It's the day of?” she blurted out as the shock of his words seeped into her. I canceled the wedding. They echoed over and over in her ears and she almost believed she’d dreamed the words.

“Why?” he mimicked, more deliberately. He took a deep breath. “Well, I figured it wasn’t fair to marry a person after what I’d done.”

“Poor Delly,” Katniss whispered before remembering herself, observing the rain steadily dripping off Peeta’s clothes. “Do you...do you want to come inside and dry off?” she asked tentatively, her brain working furiously to catch up with her mouth, to think of something more to say. Her heart plummeted into her stomach when he shook his head.

“No...no not yet,” he answered, looking her up and down with an edge of hunger that he kept only partially wrapped under his facade of seriousness. "I went right to her house after we'd been together and told her everything, Katniss.” Her eyes widened as her suspicions from her talk with Johanna were confirmed. “I told her we should break it off because I was confused, and Delly didn't need a man who would cheat on her right before their wedding.”
"But she forgave you?" Katniss asked, half in shock, half in admiration of her rival's expansiveness. She herself had never been the forgiving kind.

Peeta gave her a grim half-smile. "She told me she knew that you held a special place in my heart and while she understood, she thought we could recover from this with counseling but only if I swore to never see you again." The smile turned into a bitter smirk. "That was after she'd cursed me and thrown things at me."

"She was right, you know. To be so angry," Katniss conceded.

"Yeah," he said, his face clouding in shame. "You see, at first I was relieved because I knew I was the asshole and I deserved everything she could do to me." He ran his hands through his wet hair. "But I started to get confused again because all I could think about was you. I kept remembering all the times we spent together, all our fighting and making up and struggling together. I thought about how things ended...How I ended it..." He stared at her, probing her face for understanding.

Katniss trembled slightly at his words. She'd also spent so much of the past week thinking about the ways things had ended, concluding that it had all been such a waste.

"At one point, I told her I was afraid I might be in love with someone else."

Katniss took a sharp breath, her heart beating wildly in her chest. For several moments, she lost the ability to speak.

Peeta held his silence but after the long pause, he asked, "Aren’t you the least bit curious about who I might love so much that I would leave my bride at the altar on the day of our wedding?" His voice became gentle yet probing, but his eyes bright like two blue comets streaking across the heavens. "Don’t you wonder who’s been keeping me up every single night since the day she left my life? Who, at the mere sight of her at my wedding, was able to destroy every conviction about my life that I had ever built up until the only thing I knew to be true was that I loved her?"

Katniss eyes welled up with tears that she furiously blinked away. “I am curious,” she said slowly, trying to shore up her courage even though she was as afraid as that night he’d asked her to move him. It was not a fear born of committing to him or losing him. Not this time. It was the possibility that she might actually get what she wanted, that it could be real, if only she was brave enough to seize it.
She took a shuddering breath and continued, “Because it can’t be me. You deserve someone better. You’ve always deserved someone better. Someone who can give you everything I can’t.”

By the look on his face, Katniss knew Peeta had read the lie as easily as he had only a week ago in the bar. He took a step forward, making sure she was looking at him.

“How don’t you stop trying to tell me what I deserve and don’t deserve? You’ve always done that.” He reached out his freezing hand towards her, brushing her arm lightly, but visibly stopped himself and pulled back, his intention hanging suspended in the humid air between them. Katniss had to repress a cry at the loss of his touch, the ghost of his fingers still lingering on her skin.

“P-Peeta,” she choked out. “When you left, Haymitch said I could live a hundred life times and never deserve you. I always thought he was on to something.”

Peeta shook his head violently to stay her words. “I think I get to decide what I deserve, what I want, what I need,” he emphasized, and to Katniss’ surprise, the half smile returned, but this time, there was less bitterness in it. “Especially when you want the same thing as I do, and you’re just being too stubborn and pigheaded to admit it.” Peeta leaned towards her, shivering but holding his ground, his eyes still burning, and Katniss felt like she was being consumed.

“I’m so sorry I ruined your wedding,” she whispered abruptly, attempting to distract him away from talk of feelings.

Peeta frowned at this. “Delly took the entire church to the reception. She told me she did her best. She said she gave it her all and her conscience was clear and she was going to celebrate, because it was already paid for and she wasn’t going to let me ruin it,” he said in admiration but also with an edge of guilt that had not been, however, strong enough to keep him from coming to Katniss’ door. He reached out again, and this time, he didn’t let go of her arm.

“Anyway, that’s not the point,” he said with determination, kneading the soft flesh of her forearm. “I’m here to tell you that I love you, and I don’t care what you are willing to give me, if you want to live with me, marry me, be my girlfriend; I honestly don’t care. Because I’m not making this mistake again. I’m not going to keep looking for someone else to take the place of you.”

“Can’t we talk about this inside?” Katniss pleaded as she watched him shiver from being in cold, wet clothing.

But Peeta shook his head, giving her a look that told her she’d asked the wrong thing and
continued to stare at her, the clouds of doubt gathering in his eyes the longer they held this impasse and she knew that she’d have to do something to get him to move. She couldn’t bear to see him suffer any more and she couldn’t bear her own impatience to have him finally in her arms again.

“I’m stubborn and stupid and pigheaded and I’m sorry. I will never understand what you see in me.” She reached out to him and pulled him towards her, wrapping her arms around his waist, feeling the icy rain penetrate through the thin material of her pajamas, but he didn’t budge, his face still impassive. She knew it wasn’t enough and tried again.

“I was stupid, beyond stupid two years ago. I should have been honest with you about my fears. I...And I should have fought for you when you left. I should have known-n...” She paused, choking up, and noticed the way the light had rekindled in his eyes, giving her the strength to continue talking. “I should have known I couldn’t let you go, anymore than it seems you could me. That I need you. I need you so much, Peeta.” It was only then that Katniss realized that tears were flowing down her face. Peeta’s arms came up around her, but she still saw a hesitation in his eyes, a sliver of uncertainty, and she quailed again, wishing she were better with words than she was. He brought a hand up to caress her cheek, and Katniss sighed at the touch.

“Please, just tell me,” Peeta whispered so softly she was amazed she could hear him over the rain. He shivered again with cold and longing. “Tell me and I’ll stay. You love me, real or not real?”

Katniss scowled at the question for just a moment, but then she felt a sense of relief so profound, she thought she’d faint from it. She reached up to brush the wet wave of hair off his forehead before cupping his face with her hand in a mimic of his own. “You’re an idiot, and there’s nothing I can do about it but...” She gave him a soft smile. “Real. So very real.” She stifled a sob as she saw his face finally soften, and wrapped her arms around him. “I love you. I love you so much. You’re right about everything. Just come inside. Stay.” She gripped his tuxedo, pulling him even closer. “Please stay,” she begged.

Peeta sighed, the tension of years of pent up frustration draining away as he clutched her to him, pinioning her to his chest with freezing wet arms.

"Always," he whispered into her hair before tilting her head up to kiss her, so gently, Katniss could only sigh against his lips.

He leaned back to study her when he was done, brushing a wet piece of hair off her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said in a half-joking, half-serious manner. “So next time you decide to send me away, you better be ready to move to Antarctica, because you won’t be getting rid of me, whether you like it or not. Okay?” He hugged her to him again.
Katniss nodded, surreptitiously wiping her tears against his icy chest, and tugged him as he stepped over the threshold, back home where he belonged.

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End Notes

This was such a pain to write! I want to thank my prereaders, mitchescray, dandelionlass, madambeth and peetabreadgirl. I special shout out to my betas, katnisssdoesnotfollowback, solasvioletta and bubblegum1425, for encouraging me and keeping me from filing this one-shot in the trash. I hope you guys enjoyed it!

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