

## Always

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# **Always**

by [JavisTG](#)

## Summary

Some days are better than others. Katniss thinks about the effect that Peeta has on her.

## Notes

Written for Prompts in Panem March/April 2015, day 6: Ashes.

“Always.”

He made it sound like a promise, almost like a vow.

Even in those dark underground corridors, as the world collapsed around us, he had said it with such vehemence that I hadn't questioned his commitment or his determination. It seemed impossible at the time, to make promises, to commit to anything, the world was spinning and I thought I was rushing towards imminent death and still, in those bleak hours, when he said “always” I believed him.

So why am I surprised to find him sleeping by my side?

Is it because there are days when I still feel like I failed him? (Just like I failed everyone else.) Or is it because I know that during his darkest days I pushed him as far away as possible and ran? Maybe it's because, to my everlasting shame, I know that my actions and indecision made him vulnerable to our worst enemy's attacks. Making his captor's lies all the more hurtful because of the half-truths they contained.

My heart breaks every time I think about how I confused the fear he felt whenever he saw me with hatred, and I can't believe that, while I was hiding from myself, unable and unwilling to accept my feelings, he was digging deep inside his mind trying to find the pieces that the hijacking had scattered and working to put them back together.

Then there are those other times, when he's having a bad day because those ghosts that haunt him become too real or feel too close for him to ignore, when I know that, despite my many shortcomings, I'm the only person who can really help him and guide him back from the darkness of his ruptured mind. Those are the times when I push every bit of self-loathing, guilt and shame out of my system. Those are the days when I understand why I survived. I had to, for him, to guide him back into the light. And every time I'm in awe of how he painstakingly reconstructs the structure of the person he once was and brings it back to life.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that this determined man who refuses to be consumed by his demons, who heals my pain with tenderness and fights cruelty with kindness was once a broken boy. Someone who believed he deserved to be put down like a rabid dog. Someone who grew up feeling lonely despite being surrounded by people, who was ruthlessly overlooked by those who should have cherished him, and who thought that he wasn't needed. No one would criticize him if he just settled for surviving but he doesn't. He refuses to give up, instead he wakes up every morning and chooses to fight, he was pushed around for too long and now he demands to live, to love, to flourish.

He came back from the Capitol full of purpose. His spirit had been shattered into a million pieces, the hijacking had interfered with the essence of who he was and the war had destroyed his home. There were so many things in his past that had been tainted by misery, violence or sadness that he just wanted to start all over again. He had fought, he had suffered and he had lost pretty much everything that had once meant anything to him. He was determined to have a fresh start. He wanted to create new memories and to build a reality that was better than the one he had grown up in. I was the only constant that remained from his previous life and, incredibly enough, he still wanted me around.

It wasn't easy at first. I was broken, filled with regret and self-loathing. I was sad and lonely and I had absolutely no plans for my future. I didn't even want a future. But he did and he wanted me to be a part of it so slowly, patiently he went about getting to know the person I'd become. His main concern over the first few weeks was to keep me fed. He would show up every morning with loaves of freshly baked bread tucked under his arm and feed me. Once I was strong enough we started talking, sharing all those stories from our past that had never been told or that had been altered to please others, our audiences, our supporters, our enemies. After sharing our realities we were able to discuss our dreams, our hopes and, eventually, our nightmares.

Growing physically close was much harder this time around. I longed for his touch just as much as I had before but he was always reluctant to come closer. Even holding his hand seemed like an invasion of the personal space he seemed so bent on protecting. It wasn't until I told him that yes, I had nightmares about him but no, they never included him attacking me in any way, that I understood why he'd been so reluctant to touch me. The relief I saw in his eyes as he accepted that, in spite of everything that had happened, I wasn't afraid of him warmed my battered soul. But I know, from the way his lips reverently brush my neck, as he carefully traces the path along the lines where his fingers once left their dark, angry imprint, that he hasn't forgotten, that he'll never forget and that no amount of me telling him I don't blame him for attacking me will ever make it right.

As the morning sun filters softly through the open window I analyze the contours of his face. I want to push the unruly curls that fall over his forehead out of the way and to run my fingers along the bridge of his nose, to touch his slightly chapped lips, but I don't want to disturb his peaceful sleep.

His long golden eyelashes and the blond stubble on his jaw seem to capture the warm sunlight that's flooding the room, reflecting it, and making him glow. He looks so beautiful, so innocent and trusting. It's at times like these when I find it hard to believe that everything

we went through wasn't just a bad dream. Sometimes, when I wake up to find him like this, sleeping peacefully by my side, I almost forget about all the horrors we've endured. Almost.

Mornings can be the best part of my day or the absolute worst. There are times when I wake up full of energy and purpose. Some days I'm determined to make the best of my life. I try to make those who are no longer with us proud; I try to make their sacrifice mean something. But there are times when guilt and grief over their loss paralyze me and I just can't see how any of my actions will possibly justify their absence from this world.

Those are the mornings when I try to remember my mother's words. She once told me that she came back from her depression because she'd realized that my father wouldn't have approved of her behavior. She said that Prim and I had been precious to him, that he'd always been mindful of our needs and had tried his best to fill our lives with as much love and beauty as our situation allowed. She knew how disappointed he would have been if he had seen how she abandoned us after he was gone.

"I was so busy trying to stay connected to him in death that I forgot the connection we'd had while he was alive," she added.

So I try to follow her example. I know that my sister supported my every decision and that she was on that square on that fateful day because she wanted to help others. She believed in the revolution and all the changes it would bring about. She was on her way to becoming an insightful young woman who looked for beauty even in the dreariest places. She was mature and perceptive beyond her years. She loved openly and without reservations. She was kind and patient and she never gave up on those who needed her. I know that hiding in closets and muttering to myself hardly seems like the way to honor her memory. So, whenever I feel like I'm slipping into one of those dark moods, I try to remind myself of how sad Prim would be if she saw me like that. That usually gives me the strength I need to start walking towards the light.

Sometimes it isn't enough though. The guilt I feel over my failure to protect my loved ones from my enemies overwhelms me and even the smallest of tasks seems impossible to tackle. That's when my brain conjures up an image that invariably snaps me into action: the look on Peeta's eyes the first time he saw me after returning to District 12.

His eyes were clear and focused for the first time in months and, when he looked at me, I knew that he was seeing the real me. It might have been the first time since we'd said goodbye by the lightning tree or it might have been the first time ever but, at that moment, standing on the front steps of my house, I was no longer the girl he'd admired from afar and I wasn't the girl on fire. I wasn't the Mockingjay and I definitely wasn't the mutt he had been

so afraid of. I was just a sad, lonely, underfed and unwashed girl who had given up on life and who thought that life had given up on her.

I was forced to face the reality of what I'd become. The girl who had once managed to save her family from a life of sadness and starvation was nothing but a shell of her former self. I was ashamed to see that while I'd been sitting by the fire, slowly wasting away, Peeta had clearly been hard at work, trying to restore his memories and to understand his place in the world. Shortly after that first encounter with him I promised myself that I would never give him cause to look at me that way again. I can't say I've fully honored that pledge, someday the sorrow I feel weighs so heavily on my chest that I can hardly breathe. But, on those days when I feel the weight of guilt crushing me, the thought of his sorrowful eyes is enough to push me out of bed. Maybe it's just because I'm too proud or too stubborn but I don't want to see that look on his eyes ever again.

Lately though, as the summer days have gotten longer and warmer and the woods have turned more bountiful, it's easier to remember the good things. The smile on my sister's lips, the glow in Finnick's eyes, Rue's skilled fingers, Mr. Mellark's deep chuckle, Boggs's sharp sense of humor, my father's silvery voice...

Being able to share this new world, this new Panem we inadvertently helped create, with Peeta makes the burden of our losses a little bit lighter. Seeing how people's lives have improved, how they're no longer starving or forced to follow the pre-destined paths the government forced upon them, validates the sacrifices of those we lost. And, even though some nights are still filled with horror, waking up next to Peeta always eases my pain and fills me with hope.

I've been lying awake in bed for a while, lazily enjoying the peaceful contentment that follows a restful night, when I feel Peeta stir next to me. He stretches slowly, like Buttercup in between naps and, as I turn to face him, I can see him blinking a few times, trying to adjust to the light that's completely flooded the room by now. He turns and looks at me through sleepy eyes, a soft smile dancing on his lips.

"There she is." He says, voice still thick from sleep, "Were you watching over me?"

I nod, "always" I whisper.

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