Cure for Loneliness

She's an outcast, thrust into a new world of privilege and wealth. He is the boy with everything, and all the more lonely and angry because of it. Together Rey and Ben find the cure for loneliness. But when they are broken apart, how will they react to each other reunited as adults. Can Rey reconcile the stranger called Kylo Ren with her memories of the boy called Ben, and what will Kylo Ren do to keep Rey by his side? High school AU/Time jump/Light BDSM themes
Chapter 1

The cafeteria was deafeningly noisy, and crowded. Rey wove her way through half pushed out chairs, stepped over bags and avoided elbows as she searched for a seat. Her eye alighted on a free space, and she went for it, her skinny body shooting between the gap of two others both converging on it at once. She sat down and stretched her arms over the polished wood, baring her teeth at the two other students who stood regarding her with distain. To make them shove off faster, she added a little snarl.

The students exchanged looks, hardly flattering, before giving up, and Rey settled herself back happily. Fishing out a brown bag from her backpack, she plopped it on the table, and opened it. Ignoring the, at times covert, other times blatant, stares she received, her modest brown lunch bag a far cry from the trays surrounding her, holding sushi, pasta and gourmet salads, all freshly made by the school's personal chef team, she pulled out her PBJ and smiled.

As she chewed, she looked around in interest. The solarium above was light and airy, high ceilings reaching up in to the blue skies. There were fresh flowers, and even a tree growing in the middle of the space, not that the other students who were deep in their vapid conversations seemed to notice.

Of course, she wasn't like other students. She was the resident charity case, the niece of the long serving janitor who had caught the eye of a human interest piece when his estranged sister had turned up dead in a bedsit, and she hadn't been alone. Rey herself had called the police from the payphone on the corner, and then went back to wait with her. She hadn't been scared of the police getting her, she'd had nowhere else to go. As far as fairy tales go, she supposed she'd been lucky.

Rescued from a life of darkness and fear for a sudden uncle figure and a school that only the top elite of the city attended. Once attention gathered from the media, some plucky reporter uncovering the link between her and her uncle, and his link to the school, practically anything about St Augustines was gold as far as paper sales were concerned. The school had stepped in and offered her free education, in recognition of her uncle's long service, and of course, unspokenly, because of her horrendous past. Charity and pity seemed to stop at the administration level however. The other students at St. Augustines hadn't been very happy to have their elite little bubble burst by a homeless, penniless and wild little urchin, who seemed to watch people too closely, laugh at all the wrong times, and generally make a nuisance of herself.

The students at the table next to her stood up to go and refill their drink, and Rey, drawn as always to opportunity noticed the open bag left on the floor by her foot. Her fingers itched as she casually glanced down, her eyes scanning over the contents.

Her other hand, holding her sandwich made the tiniest movement, one you wouldn't have seen if you'd not been watching very closely, and sent her apple rolling to the ground at the same time as she exclaimed and leaned forward, her half shrugged off backpack falling to the side. Once she was floor level, she was quick, her fingers deftly reaching for her chosen treasure, quickly into the backpack and then she was leaning back up, brandishing her falling apple. She looked around, and met anyones look who'd happened to glance over. It was important to brazen it out, she knew that better than anyone. Eyes could give you away, or acting too guilty. Smiling with satisfaction, she bit into her apple, a sweet jet of juice filling her mouth and leaking down the side, and chewed with determination. As she did, she began to feel aware of another pair of eyes, warming the side of her face. Refusing to be intimidated, she turned her head around and met them full on.

Her eyes were full of challenge, ready to fight, to scrap and claw, no matter who watched her. His were altogether different. They held silent amusement, perhaps even enjoyment and appreciation at
her gall. She ran her eyes over him, as he watched her, placing him to be older than her, and vaguely familiar.

His dark hair was almost black, and he wore it long, too long, she thought critically. He looked tall, even sitting, though the rest of his body didn't seem to have caught up. His shoulders were wide, his limbs a long and gangly mess, elbows and knees and an adam's apple that stuck out a mile. His face wasn't bad, but not really great either, she thought critically. It was too sharp and too soft all at once. Sharp cheek bones and jaw, with a puffy soft mouth, and a too long nose. Winged brows fleeing across expressive eyes, a dash of black against the paleness of his skin. Dotted with beauty spots and a rash of acne on his chin, which was also sporting the dark shadow of stubble, too dark through that translucent skin. He was a man boy in an expanding body, stuck between everywhere and nowhere. Hit fitted school shirt billowed on his reed thin body and then she noticed his ears. Jutting out at an awkward angle, they were hard to ignore, she thought uncharitably.

His eyes were concealed, behind thick glasses, light reflecting off the lenses, hiding his expression if the overhead lights caught him in a particular way. All she could make out was his generous mouth, and the way the full lips seemed naturally to turn down. At her scrutiny one of the corners tugged upwards, for a brief flashing moment, before he was pushing up from the table in front of him and she felt his gaze turn away.

It seemed he had noticed her light slight of hand, but didn't seem about to tell anyone, which suited her fine. She turned back around and glanced down at her left over lunch, a half eaten apple and a smear of peanut butter on the cellophane of her sandwich. Biting off a piece of apple, she took it carefully in her fingers and scooped up the left over peanut butter, popping it in her mouth and enjoying the sweet and salty contrast. Beside her she heard a retching sound and slid her eyes to caught a female student, lustrous locks no doubt washed by the most expensive shampoos, petal like skin only touched by the most expensive moisturiser sticking her fingers down her throat to emit the vomiting sound, she broke off and the group of clones around the table all laughed at her joke.

"That was truly disgusting, are you some kind of scavenger stray? Licking scraps from the floor?" the girl addressed her, her beautiful face frozen in an ugly sneer. Rey shrugged, refusing to let her cheeks redden from the attention they were attracting.

The girl however, was clearly not finished. Reaching over with her salad fork, she dropped a cherry tomato onto the floor by Rey's foot.

"Here you go doggie, a treat for you" she said maliciously, and leaned back, basking in the shocked laughter of her friends as they watch Rey's reaction. Rey locked gazes with the girl, and held her blue eyes in hers. She watched as the girl's bravado started to slip away under the long scrutiny. She held it longer still, tilting her head, inquisitive like a sparrow, inspecting a worm caught under its foot. She saw finally a bloom of red blossom in the other girl's cheeks. She was young, probably 16, the same year as Rey. The other student's eyes darted to the side, growing aware of the swelling silence. Finally, her eyes dropped in defeat as she crossed her arms over her chest and shrugged irritably.

"Whatever freak" she said as she turned back to her friends, the earlier atmosphere lost. Rey stood up, balling her cellophane and brown bag in a ball in her hand and hoisted her bag on her shoulder. Stepping between the tables, her eyes still fixed on the lowered head of the bully below her, she shouldered past and walked away. She felt a momentary tug at her throat, now the confrontational atmosphere had passed but kept her head up, sailing through the crowd like a queen leaving her throne room.
Her favourite thing about the school was it's location. Although it was technically in the city, it bordered a massive woodland on its outskirts, and Rey loved to wander in the trees. The outdoors smelled fresh and clean here, unlike the refuse and urine stained concrete deserts of her childhood. She was able to walk the fresh dirt paths, lightly compacted from wear dusted with a coating of needles and if she found a good spot, climb up to the higher branches of the magnificent old trees that graced the forest. She was usually alone there, just as she preferred, and could wile away many an hour out in the open air, her school books forgotten at the bottom, staring out into the leaves and letting her mind wander.

Today however, she realised as she settled into her usual perch high up amid the leaves of a giant beech tree, she was not alone. She heard the faint drift of voices approaching her and shifted in her seat to get a better look. She wasn't shy about eavesdropping, sneaking around undetected. Nothing in her previous life had ever taught her it was wrong, and in fact it had turned out to be useful on occasion. She glimpsed legs coming toward her, a girls, slim, in the uniform skirt, through a lot shorter than Rey's was. The girl stood into the clearing under the tree first, and spun around, her liquid gold hair spilling over her shoulders with such precision it could only be a practised move. She stood with her arms crossed her chest, her expensive loafers tapping with impatience. Slowly, another set of legs, then a head appeared. A guy, in less of a hurry, judging by his casual stroll, hands in the pockets and nonchalent air. As he stopped below, black hair standing out against the shadows of the trees, Rey realised it was the same too long hair from earlier, the older student from the cafeteria. He leant against the trunk of the tree while the blonde girl paced in front of him. They seemed an unusual pair, Rey thought, moving closer to try and hear better. She carefully slid onto the next branch down and was rewarded when the blondes voice drifted to her clearly.

"With the ski trip, and then St Barts, it's just not enough. And I'll need new clothes, if I don't have a new wardrobe what will everyone think?" she demanded.

"That clothes perhaps aren't the be all and end all?" he asked blankly, and she sensed a coldness coming from him. The girl looked furious at his answer, and then seemed to reign herself in, stepped closer she touched his arm lightly.

"Ben, you know what I mean…"

"Why don't you use your reputation and sway to change how people think? Stand out from the herd, be an original" he suggested further, his disdainful tone implying that she was anything but.

"Please, I am not some ugly spinster, I'll hardy have to rely on my personality to find myself a good match or remain on the shelf. You know this is important to me" she softened her tone again, before stepping forward closer and brushing her hand over his cheek, as he watched her, unmoved. Rey watched in confusion. They hardly seemed a couple, his disapproval of her was evident, as was her superior looks and social standing. They didn't even seem to be friends strangely.

"It's not like you don't extract your pound of flesh" the blonde's words were so quiet as to be almost inaudible as she put her mouth to his ear and nibbled it. He remained unmoving, arms crossed over his chest.

"Are you suggesting we renegotiate the terms of our agreement?" he asked, in a voice of stone. The blonde sighed and stepped back.

"Fine, I want my allowance increased. And in return, you can have…” she trailed off, thinking furiously. He watched her, his head to the side.

"Do you seriously want me to believe you didn't come to this discussion with your terms already decided. Just spit it out Eliza." He said quietly, watching as a red flush mottled the girls pale throat.
"3 months. Every 3 months" she finally said, her eyes raised meekly to his, with a submission there, and a hint of something else, a want, a desire, subconscious enough the girl no doubt had any idea it was there at all.

"2" He countered.

"Fine, 2" she agreed quickly, and Rey watched as the girl permitted herself a small triumphant smile as she turned to go.

"When will the money be there?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Don't worry yourself. I'm good for it." He replied, his head tilted downwards in thought as the blonde moved quickly out of eyeshot. He didn't move however, just continued his contemplation of the forest floor, as Rey shifted uncomfortably above.

"You can come down now" he said suddenly into the silence. Rey froze, her heart rate racking up a few notches. And if she were in any doubt of who he was talking to, it was soon put aside as he looked directly up it the tree and her.

Exposed and uncomfortable she started down, slipping lithely from branch to branch before landing just before him, pulling her skirt back into place and her shirt down over her tummy. She pushed the escaped strands of hair from the 3 buns dotting the back from her forehead and adopted a deceptively causal pose.

"I was planning on coming down now anyway" she muttered, her cheek beginning to pinken under his long gaze. His eyes drifted over her, dishevelled uniform, bedraggled hair, her high cheeks bones and androgynous shape, narrow hipped and flat chested.

"You must be Rey, Old Jack's niece" the boy said, making no move to straighten up or introduce himself.

"Well, who are you then?" she asked, disliking how infamous she already was at the school

"I'm Ben. Ben Solo," He said quietly before glancing up into the tree.

"You're quite the climber" he remarked and she wasn't sure if it was a compliment or not.

"Climber and thief, interesting combination." He finished, and her eyes swung back to his face. She tensed to run away, starting to hate the smirk that whispered across his lips as he took in her clenched fists.

"It's nothing that those people would miss… its just garbage to them." She argued and flushed at his raised eyebrow.

"With quite the temper, I see. No need to worry, little scavanger, I won't tell anyone. I might be the only person at this school who thinks less of the miscreants who go here than you."

"Do you include yourself in that?"

"Undoubtedly." He said, with that half smile again. She let the tension release from her fists. He didn't seem about to tell on her, though exactly why he was spending time chatting with her in the woods was anyone's guess.

"Who was that girl?" she asked bluntly.
"Eliza Montgomery"

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"What do you think?" Rey shook her head slowly.

"She's the most popular girl in school, not that I'd expect you to know that yet, outcast as you are."

"I don't care what anyone here thinks about me" Rey stated hotly. He nodded quietly

"That I can see."

"So, if you're not her boyfriend then why were you meeting?"

"We have a business arrangement of a sort. We help each other out in a mutually beneficial way"

"What does she do for the money you give her?" Rey asked, unable not to cutting to the quick of what she'd seen. Her direct question seemed to take him of guard, but it didn't anger him.

"Does she sleep with you?" she continued, and flinched as his grey eyes narrowed at her.

"You ask a lot of questions" he said tightly. She shrugged.

"Is that it? Sex for money?" she pressed, folding her arms across her chest.

"What would you know about it?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

"More than you'd guess, I suppose. Anyway, It's not a big deal, probably quite a normal arrangement." In her mind's eye, her mother smeared lipstick and acrid smell of stale cigarettes lingered, along with a light of triumph in her tired eyes, and the feeling of food, a full belly and deep sleep.

"Not at St Augustines" he frowned as his eyes rolled over her again.

"How old are you anyway kid?"

"I'm almost 16, and I'm not a kid." She said, standing up straighter and pushing her chin out. He inspected her then, his cool eyes assessing her defensive stance.

"Next time you want to eavesdrop on people up a tree, don't forget your books" he said, casting a glance at her backpack laying forgotten at the trunk of the beech, he turned to leave.

"See you around, kid" he said with a last half smile in her direction.

Rey unlocked the door of her uncle small caretaker's cottage, not too far from where she had met Ben in the woods. The smell of dinner greeted her, and felt a pang for moment that she hadn't made it back before to be more helpful. The small cottage was cosy and warm, her uncle having considerably more nesting skills than her mother had had. She placed her bag in her room, by the bed and changed out her school uniform, hanging it up carefully. She only had one, unlike other students who seemed to use them disposably.

She pulled on comfortable leggings and a long t-shirt, the clothes hanging off her slender frame as always, before opening her bag and pulling out her ill-gotten gains. A hairbrush with a back of silver, if she wasn't mistaken, and she rarely was. Pulling out a concealed panel in the floor, she added it to her collection, mentally tallying up her rainy-day fund. Something losing her mother had taught her was to plan for the day when you were on your own. It'd only be a matter of time, and
she didn't ever intend to be so vulnerable again. Sensing her mood spiralling downwards, she pulled her books out her bag and cracked them open. The downside of spending afternoons roaming the woods was that there was still a lot of homework to do, the upside of not having any friends was she had a good long while at night to do it. She had a lot of catching up to do, another poorly anticipated result of the schools offer. Her attendance had been spotty at best at her school in the city, and her mom hadn't been much for making her go. In fact, if she was free, she often persuaded Rey to stay at home with her, and they would go on one of her crazy adventures. A hard lump of sadness pressed down in her throat as she thought of her, her red lipstick and skinny jeans, charging along in front of her, making the dirty sidewalk seem like a yellow brick road in Oz, and every random weirdo they passed a charming village character. Those were the good times, and she would always cherish them.

Pulling out an art book, she opened the pages, and felt the memories of her mother increase ten fold, a stream became a river as she looked at the canvases. Those had been the most special of the adventure days. Days they would catch the train to the museums, and spend a whole day wandering around the bight, air-conditioned building, while her mom told her stories of the people in the pictures. And it seemed her legacy had lasted, as Rey loved art. In the art class, all the street cool and fierce nonchalance fell away, and she was a little girl standing beside her mother, gazing at the purest form of beauty she could imagine.

From the kitchen, she heard the sound of cutlery clanking and reluctantly shut the book. Time for dinner and more awkward getting to know you chats.
All the ghouls come out to play

The next day at school Rey suffered through gym, her least favourite subject. It was hard to avoid the other girls in the changing room, and she hated taking her clothes off in front of them. She was the same age, but just a late bloomer, or the results of going too long with chips and twinkies as her only nutrition, her body still hadn't gotten the message that she was 16 now.

She lingered over her tattered gym bag, letting the other girls dress and go out, flashy and confident in their designer sports wear. Alone at last, she quickly pulled off her uniform and pulled on her gym kit. There was no set clothes for gym, making it the most hotly contested fashion show at school. Rey was sure she was not in the running, with her uncle's old boxing t-shirt on, and shorts that were at least two sizes too small.

She shoved her feet into sneakers and went out, lowering her head against the teacher's impatient look, and took a seat on the gym floor, behind all the other girls. She could see a boys class taking place at the bottom end of the gym. The teacher started droning on about elective sports, and Rey found herself recognising a familiar head. Ben stood, his face the study of boredom. They were playing basketball, and he was standing on the outskirts of the court, hardly seeming to pay attention. He looked uncomfortable, downed in a baggy t-shirt, making his skinny neck rise up like a delicate stalk. He hunched over, uncomfortable with his height, his spine curved over, long arms dangling, the picture of athleticism he was not. He met her eyes across the space, and the only sight of recognition she got was the slightest rising of the corner of his mouth.

"Rey Nessuno, come and make your electives" the teacher called, and Rey went forward and looked at the list of classes. Most of them had a gold circle next to them.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It's a paid elective, your parents pay for the equipment before the course starts" the teacher explained. Rey chewed her lip as she looked down the list again. Jack hadn't said much about money since she'd arrived. But, she knew there couldn't be much left over each month. He had probably coped fine alone, but now, with a teenager kid and an expensive new school, she didn't need to see the coupons he'd been clipping to feel guilty. She felt guilty enough already.

"I'll take swimming and self-defence" she said, quickly finding two of the only subjects that didn't need equipment. The teacher noted it down.

"They're both mixed classes" the teacher said, raising an eyebrow at Rey, who simply shrugged in response. So far, the girls were more annoying than the boys at this school, she thought to herself.

As she went to take her seat again, she heard a commotion break out from the other side of the hall. The girls all twisting around to see, Rey followed, seeing a fight starting, two boys standing in the middle of the court, and one was none other than Ben.

The other boy was in his face, gesturing wildly and pointing toward the ball. Ben stood his ground, the only sign he was angry was a tick in his jaw. And then, suddenly, Ben threw a punch at the other kid, who went down hard. Silence followed, and then a commotion as the teacher came over shouting. The girls all started whispering and exclaiming over the boy who had fallen, who was now sitting up and holding his nose, red blood dripping down the front of his t-shirt. But Rey only had eyes for Ben, who was walking out, ignoring the shouting teacher and the looks from his classmates. It seemed she wasn't the only deliberate loner at St Augustines.
"Hey! Watch out!" a voice called, right before Rey found a hard body smacking into hers. She looked up and met pale eyes, small and arrogant sneering down at her. She turned to walk around him, and sighed when the boy shifted with her. She looked up at him, waiting for him to do whatever it was he was planning. The hallway was emptying, the bell having rang for 5th period a few minutes ago. She had been walking and reading, an art book the teacher had lent her, and not looking where she was going.

"Sorry" she mumbled.

"Is there something wrong with you? You walked right into me" the arrogant guy said, and Rey tried once again to go around, stopping only as he slammed his arm into the locker beside her head, effectively blocking her from going around him.

"I'm talking to you" he said, and with a cruel swipe, her book shot across the floor. She looked at it, wondered if the pages had ripped, and then squinted up into the bully's face.

"I said I was sorry, what's your problem?" she demanded. His face seemed familiar, and she quickly summoned a name. Armitage Hux, some son of an industry leader whatever, everyone was someone importants child here. Except her.

"You are. Our school doesn't need a sad sack charity case dragging us down" he said. She feinted right, and when he shifted, scurried to the left, passing him quickly, and escaping down the hall, though her pride demanded she not run.

"That goes for you and your loser uncle" his voice shouted, following her around the corner where she drew up abruptly to avoid another full body collision. Ben stopped mid step, his book bag falling forward with momentum as Rey threw her hands up to stop bumping him, and only just grazing his chest.

They stared at each other, and then, she saw Ben make to go past her.

"Wait!" she said, her hand shouting out, she grabbed his arm to stop him. He stiffened at the contact, his dark eyes staring down at her hand on his arm, his brow furrowing.

"Are you ok? What's wrong?" she asked, following his eyes to her hand. She snatched it back, grabbing the strap of her bag instead.

"I'm fine." He said shortly, and gave her a look of confusion.

"I'm Rey, we met yesterday, in the woods" she said helpfully. The ghost of a grin touched his lips.

"I recall." Rey huffed, her hand sliding up and down her strap as she fidgeted from one foot to the other.

"Are you alright? I saw the fight in the gym"

"I'm fine."

"Aren't you in trouble?" Ben just shrugged, and Rey found herself studying the way his floppy black hair waved into his eyes. He really needed a haircut.

"Not really" he admitted, and held her curious gaze.

"Are you trying to get kicked out?" she suddenly asked, fascinated by his unreadable expression.

"You ask a lot of questions" he finally said, starting to walk away, down the hall as Rey trailed
behind him, watching him go.

"And you don't ask any!" she called half-heartedly.

The weeks rolled by in much the same pattern as Rey settled into school. She didn't make any friends, and eventually Jack stopped asking about that at dinner.

She did start to catch up in class, for most of her subjects, which mean she had more time for art. Her personal emergency fund kept growing, fuelled by an amazingly unobservant student body, or one so rich there was nothing they couldn't afford to replace.

She saw Eliza Montgomery again, and saw how different the social circles of her and Ben Solo were. Eliza was the darling of the school, dating a procession of jocks and trust fund kids, all with the same clean cut all American good looks. Rey realised how much of a secret it was that she even knew Ben, for he seemed to be as much a social outcast as she, though, unlike Rey, he seemed to be one through choice.

He was taciturn and non-communicative, and it was only a few days until she heard about the other part of his reputation, one for violence. Apparently, he had started and participated in quite the number of fights, one and off the sports field. He never apologised and he never backed down. It was then Rey had learned exactly why he was never expelled, and why indeed Eliza had chosen him for their indecent arrangement. His family were the biggest donors to the school, and in a student body that boasted sons of sheiks, that was an achievement. More than ever, he intrigued her. In a school of people desperately trying to prove their superiority over each at every turn, someone who sailed through, careless of other's opinions was like a beacon to Rey. Always on the unconventional side herself, she was drawn in by that self-assurance, by the independence it took to simply not care what others thought.

She soon found out how he managed to keep to himself most of the time. He spent most of his classes ensconced in advanced studies where only a small amount of students studied together in loosely structured time, with a professor on hand to help.

Jack was happy that Rey was catching up, and even attended the parents evening, to Rey's horror. How could she tell her uncle that she felt like an outsider at the school he was so proud of? That the students he looked after and cleaned up after day after day thought more of the dirt beneath their feet than him. It hurt her, seeing those looks when she walked into the school on parents evening, beside Jack, wearing the old black jacket he wore to funerals and a navy tie. She squirmed with embarrassment as they waited along with the other parents, whose handbags and clothes flashed names she only knew from the billboards she used to see around the city, when she would tag along at her restless mother's side. Her mother. She would walk into the school like she owned it, be sarcastic and rude to the other parents, sneer at the teachers, if she'd come at all, but Jack, he tried, he tried for her, and it broke her heart a little bit, that kernel of embarrassment. The cruelty of strangers, and the shame of wounded pride.

Her teachers were happy with her progress, though it as mentioned more than once that she might try to integrate more with other students, though it was never acknowledged that it might be impossible. Maths, her worst subject was predictably average, and Rey saw her uncle's face tighten with worry at the teacher's words.

"Rey must try harder to catch up, the material is moving quickly now, and if she doesn't get on top of it, I'm afraid she will fall further behind."

"What can we do?" Jack asked.
"I would suggest private tutoring" the teacher suggested, and then trailed off, as though just realising the impossibility of that.

"You could help at home, with her homework" the teacher added, and Rey felt angry at the careless words. She saw Jack's fingers tighten on the papers he held a moment, before relaxing.

"We'll work something out" he said, standing to leave. Back at the cottage, Jack asked to see Rey's homework.

"Don't worry about it, I'll work harder. Anyway, it's not like I'm planning on being a mathematician" she grumbled as she gave him the workbook.

"Maths is important, and passing your exams is important."

She had merely shrugged in return. Her uncle had turned a rare angry look at her then, and she had frozen under the weight of it.

"This opportunity, this school… it's not something to take lightly Rey. It's a gift"

"It feels more like a curse. I hate it there" she had shot back.

"I know you hate it there, do you think I can't see? But it's the best chance I've got of giving you a better life, and I'm going to do it, no matter the cost." He had said, running his hand through his thick wavy hair in frustration.

"I could just go to public school" she suggested and he had looked almost pained at her words.

"This is one of the best school in the country. With this in your background, college, jobs, everything would be easier for you. I know it's hard now, I know that, I know they don't make it easy, but if you give it up, the only person it punishes is you and they win" his voice softened.

"Don't let them win Rey. Take this chance that you've been given and wring the most of it. Make it count" he said roughly, before turning back to the Maths homework and sitting down that the wooden dining table. She had stood more a moment longer, and then slinked away and gone to bed, unwilling to see him pouring over the sums and making the guilt and ache in her heart even worse. She lay in the dark and thought about the student's disdainful looks as she had walked through the school and the terrible loneliness of being disliked by people who barely knew your name. Jack was right. If she had to endure all those things, might as well make it count, and as she lay there in the dark, watching the shadows move across the wall, she realised she had a solution.

She shifted uncomfortably in the tree, her homework done and boredom was setting in. It was the fifth day she had waited here to see Ben alone again, and she was beginning to doubt her brilliant plan. Then through the trees, a white shirt flashed, and she felt triumphant. She watched as he walked toward the tree she was hidden in, his jacket folded carelessly over a bag strap, his too long hair flopping in his eyes. She started down as quickly as she could.

Ben stopped under the tree, and reached into his bag for a pack of cigarettes. He lit it slowly and looked to her, seemingly completely unsurprised by seeing her here. Even smoking looked awkward on him.

"Hello." Rey said lamely, suddenly nervous. He took a deep draw of smoke and nodded a greeting.

"Smoking's bad for you, you know"
"So are a lot of things" he murmured, leaning back against a wide tree trunk.

"Did your parents go to parents evening?" she asked, trying to find a way to bring up her request.

"They didn't quite manage this one" he said, his tone sardonic.

"Jack went" Rey said, looking away as the tell-tale flush of embarrassment remembered tainted her cheeks.

"I'm not doing so well in Maths" she admitted, forcing herself to meet Ben's expectant gaze.

"I was thinking maybe you could tutor me" she blurted out. His eyebrows shot up for a moment, and he coughed. She had surprised him. He stubbed out the cigarette.

"Why would I do that?" he asked bluntly, his tone now amused. Rey scuffed her old converse on the pine needles littering the floor.

"To be a nice guy?" she tried. He smirked, inviting her to try again.

"To prove to the kids at this school that they didn't win. That they couldn't break me" she said, her voice truthful, and her expression open. She couldn't know what a pitiful picture she made, with her pleading expression and large eyes, her thin cheeks, barely distinguishable as female except for her generous mouth, now downturned. Her shabby inform, second hand to begin with, and scrapped up knees, knobbles of bone on skinny legs. Ben saw it all. A little misfit like Rey was amusing enough to observe, but to get involved with?

He shook his head.

"They don't matter enough to me, and they shouldn't to you either" he said, grabbing his bag off the floor and starting for the path.

"Wait!" she touched his arm as he passed her, looking up into his hidden face, the hanging curtain of stringy hair concealing a strong jaw, pimpled with red spots and shiny nose. Puberty was not being kind to Ben Solo.

"Please. I need help, and we can't afford anyone, and I don't want to let Jack down" she said. He looked down at her small hand on his arm. He wondered when the last time was that someone had voluntarily touched him.

"I'm not a very good teacher"

"Perfect, I'm not a very good student" she replied, pleading in her eyes.

"Neither am I" he said.

"But you're really smart, I know, everyone knows." She pleaded. He looked at her impassively a moment longer, his eyes drifting back to her small hand on his arm, turning over her proposal in his head.

"Sorry little scavenger. I'm not the sort of person who can help you" he said decidedly as he turned and started away.

"What, not smart enough?" she challenged, her voice ringing with frustration.

"Not patient enough" he replied, shooting her a slight smile, before leaving. She watched him go, determination forming in her bones. She couldn't give up so easily, not when Jack was so invested.
She'd just have to think of a way to persuade him, she thought, eyeing his all back disappearing from the clearing.

"Are you in trouble?" The smooth voice pulled Rey from her plans of how she was going to achieve bring Ben Solo around to her side, and she looked up to see another student, one she hadn't seen before sitting beside her chair, his book bag resting on his lap. He was surveying her with interest, his mahogany eyes warm and bright, his tentative smile more welcoming than anything she'd seen directed toward her at the school in weeks.

"I don't know. Maybe" she admitted. The boy frowned, his polished dark brow creasing with curiosity.

"You don't know? Didn't they tell you why you had to come here?" She shook her head, resting back against the wall in resignation.

The door to the office opened then, and they both looked up to find Principle Kendsho there.

"Come on in" he gestured, and they hurried to comply.

"Rey, this is Finn. He is student liaison for another school in the area, Insorto Heights. It's our sister school in the community" Kendsho explained, and Rey thought of all she knew of the public school within a few miles. It didn't have the best reputation, but where would after St. Augustines.

"We are working together on some projects to bring our schools closer, and share… the benefits we are lucky to enjoy at St Augustines with Insorto, and we want it to be student led. Student involvement, student ideas. Finn is representing Insolvo, and I thought that you Rey, might like to be St Augustines representative." He finished, and sat back, waiting for her reaction.

"Why me?"

"I thought, given your background, you might be interested in learning more about the community and other schools, other students. Similarly, I thought that you and Finn would work well together, and have a lot in common. Also, it will look great on your record" he said, with barely a flush at the assumptions. Rey quickly surmised that he couldn't get any of the rich and important students at St Augustines to agree to work with lowly public school students, never mind go to the school and couldn't entice them with school record appeal, as these students were guaranteed entry to whichever University they wished.

"What do you think?" Finn asked, and she looked over at him. He seemed nice, and normal for once, his sneakers being a brand she had actually heard of. His gaze was steady, no tricks, no sneers, his expression open, and she found herself smiling instinctively back. She nodded slowly.

"That's very good news Rey, I am pleased." Principle Kendsho said with no little relief. They started to plan their first meeting, and Rey found herself looking forward to working with Finn, and maybe even making a proper friend.

On their way out the office, Rey hung back, as Kendsho turned back to his computer.

"Sir?"

"Yes Rey?"

"I was wondering if there was a tutoring program available at school?" she asked.
"In what way?"

"Well, at my old school, you could sign up for help, from older students, volunteers" she explained, and lost hope as Kendsho's head began to shake.

"I'm afraid not, voluntary spirit has never been something valued at St Augustines. I'm sorry, I wish it was." He said, and he did sound regretful. She thought a moment,

"Maybe that's something we could help set up? Between our schools I mean, it would definitely help our profile in the community, and benefit the students who needed help" she said, watching the Principle turn it over.

"Maybe, it might be a great idea Rey, talk it out with Finn and see what you come up with" he suggested, and she smiled as she left. She was going to get help with Math one way or another.

That afternoon was her first martial arts class as her gym elective. She waited again until all the girls had changed been hurrying into her clothes and scooting out, sitting down at the furthest edge of the group.

The floor was cold under her bare thighs and she wrapped her arms around her waist, listening as the teacher talked through the syllabus. They were to try several different types of martial arts and even some self-defence, which Rey was looking forward to. The first few sessions would focus on physical fitness. As Rey listened, she became aware of a pair of eyes watching her and turning her head, caught sight of Ben Solo's dark, solemn gaze. She stared back, still stung by his refusal to help her, before the teacher bid them all to stand and run around the hall for 12 minutes. The class was small, not many other girls, and Rey wasn't surprised. There were a lot of other sports on offer, and if money was no object, they had all the choice in the world. She started jogging around alone. The pace was fairly brisk to begin with, though a few front runners soon fell back and Rey continued on. She wasn't tired, she was fit and ran a lot, she could tell that a lot of the kids in class weren't very active, maybe just preferring the idea of being able to do cool kung fu moves. She felt a presence coming up to her side. She knew it was Ben because of the radiating stillness, an aura of unapproachability he seemed to surround himself with. She ran on and ignored him.

"Still sore about the tutoring?" he remarked, sounding as unbothered by the run as she was.

"No. I've already come up with another solution, no thanks to you. Why are you in this class? Aren't you a senior?" she asked.

"It was the only option given my schedule. That's a shame about the tutoring" he said, and she almost stopped.

"Why? Did you change your mind?" she asked hopefully, turning to glimpse a small grin playing around his full lips.

"Of course not, I just wanted to hear you beg some more" he said, and she couldn't resist sticking her toe out a second to trip him. He easily jumped it and kept running, a sound coming from him that was almost a laugh. She scowled.

"You're the worst"

"I thought you'd already handled it?" he continued, and that teasing grin was back. She wasn't sure what had gotten into him today but it irked her.

"I have… maybe you're not the only one who can make secret arrangements to get what they want"
"Rey, that's not funny, you're just a kid" he said, and she could see all pretence of kidding was gone. She snorted, annoyed by his condescension.

"You don't know me Solo, and you didn't want to help, so it's not your business anymore" she fumed and pulled away, working up to an easy sprint. His assuming she'd do whatever it is that Eliza does with him to get what she wants sent her into a spiralling rage. She didn't know what exactly the details of their arrangement were, but she was sure it wasn't ever the kind of thing she would do, and the fact that Ben so easily thought she would was galling.

Their interaction seemed to have made an impact on him too, as she found him waiting for her outside the locker room. His hair damp from the showers, pushed back behind his too large ears, he looked like he wished the ground would swallow him up. She stepped out the door, and upon seeing him, pivoted on her heel to go around him. He pushed off the wall and approached her.

"Rey. I shouldn't have said that – should have assumed you'd…"

"Be a whore?" Rey said, and saw him flinch.

"That's not what I meant. I don't think Eliza is a whore, I'd never call her that. She's desperate and alone… we give each other something we need" he said.

"Sex and money" Rey stated and watched a red flush tint Ben's cheeks.

"How old are you anyway kid? You make me blush" he asked, a half smile tugging his lips. She shrugged in response, her face hard.

"So, what do you want?" she asked after a long moment of silence.

"I wanted to say I didn't mean to upset you. I'm not… good at interacting with people all the time. I find it hard, to understand people, what will upset them" he ground out, looking uncomfortable.

"In case you haven't noticed, I don't really fit in here" he said, running a large bony hand through his hair.

"And I do?" she snorted, crossing her arms over her chest.

"No, you stick out like a sore thumb" he said with a shadow of a grin.

"Well, don't be so pleased about it" she muttered as she moved around him to get to her next class.

Armitage Hux.

Rey became aware of a growing animosity toward her in the halls, and she was pretty sure it was coming from one boy in particular. The very one that had knocked her things out her hands in the hall, and she had finally learned his name. She had been hiding in a stall waiting for the other girls to finish straightening their hair applying lip gloss after swimming when she'd heard some girls talking about him. Pale and read haired with that icy expression, apparently it took more that a bad personality to put these girls off, as they were intrigued by his cruel, bad boy looks. Rey knew better. That cruel superiority and vicious smirk were just signs that he was more interested in abusing and tormenting that romancing, she'd seen the same look on her mother's boyfriends. All so very similar in looks and attitude she'd be hard pressed to summon an actual face to mind, but the
cruelty, the predatory gleam they had shared, that she would never forget. She tried her best to steer clear of him, avoid his eyes, or his insults and she managed well. She was used to disappearing, used to avoiding curious gazes, evidenced by her growing rainy day souvenir fund.

She did well in avoiding him in all but swimming. The first day she had stepped out the changing room, nervously adjusting the straps on the new swimsuit that Jack had picked her up at the supermarket, the first thing she had seen around the pool was Hux. He had looked her up and down with an icy distain, his cruel lips curling back in a smirk, before leaning over to his cronies and whispering something that made them all look over and laugh. Her cheeks flaming red, she had tried to ignore them and gone and sat on the edge of the pool staring into the blue depths to try and calm down. The class itself was fine, though Rey continued to be a terrible swimmer. She hadn't had much chance to practice before and still only knew basics. The rest of the class were much better, though there were some girls who didn't want to get their hair wet, so she didn't feel too bad about her performance.

At the end of class, as she lingered, unwilling to change with all the other girls, she slowly reached the ladder and started to pull herself out. As she found the bottom rung and started up, she saw a pair of feet approaching her, and knew in her belly she had made a mistake, even before looking up and seeing Hux's face.

He smiled down her her, and she froze. He was blocking the top of the stair, bracing his hands on the poles. She looked around and could see that everyone else had headed to the locker rooms, including the teacher.

"What do you want?"

"How dare you join this class and pretend to be one of us. What kind of dirty street diseases are you infecting the pool with just being in there?" he said, his voice silky with malice. She tried not to let that particular barb hurt her, but it did. Sinking into the vulnerable place where her past and present met and all her insecurities writhed.

"Get out my way" she said flatly.

"Or you'll do what?" he pressed, stepping closer as she attempted to climb up the ladder, thinking she could just force him back. Then, faster than she could anticipate, he suddenly stepped forward, bring his foot down on the top of her head, and she was underwater. Unprepared, she swallowed a huge mouthful as she screamed, and she felt it burn up her nose. His foot was a lead weight on her head and she twisted to try and get out from under it, but she was panicking and every move she made he anticipated. Her lungs started to scream for air, and she forced herself to stop struggling and stop making it easy for him. Instead, she stilled, and brought her hands up quickly, grasping his foot, and took hold of his toes. She gripped the smallest one and largest and pulled them in the opposite directions as hard as she could. She pulled with all her strength and felt his foot start to shift on her head, and then she was able to slip out from underneath. She broke the surface, gasping for air, her nose streaming with water and snot, her eyes burning red. She hacked up the swallowed water, spitting it into the pool remorselessly and shot her eyes around the pool, looking for the next attack, but he has gone. Trembling, she held onto the edge of the pool getting her breath back, her lungs still rattling wetly.

Ben Solo watched the clock on his laptop, and softly shut the lid. He could try and pretend it wasn't, but in his heart he knew that the extremely late hour meant that his father wasn't coming home.

Again.
He knew that his mother would be done waiting and would already have gone to bed. Resigned to another night alone.

He wondered if she preferred it.

He put his laptop on the floor and shifted onto his side to sleep. Shadows moved beyond the blinds, sending their spidery fingers across the white of his wall. It was late, and as always he struggled to sleep. He thought of Eliza and tried to summon some comforting memory or thought of her and their time together, her silken skin, her breathy moans, her complete submission, but it left him cold, as usual.

Sometimes he felt as though he was retreating further and further into a fortress of ice in his heart, and his body was slowly freezing from the inside out. He felt so removed from everything, so distant, nothing seemed to penetrate his isolation anymore. But what excuse did he have for being unhappy? For being lonely?

He thought of Rey then, a tiny ball of fire and energy, a tiny star burning with feeling. Surely, she would have an excuse for isolating herself, withdrawing, for feeling achingemptiness. It made him feel weak and ashamed that he couldn't manage better than a half-starved street urchin. And he did know a little of her past, he had been one of the few to read past the headlines. To read of her background and the situation she had been found in. Yes, he thought maybe Rey was a kindred spirit, though her pain was earned from her difficult life, whereas his was merely the product of being a strange, inconvenient, ungrateful boy, born into a family of power and wealth and left cold by it all.

He brought to mind the words of his tutor, his only true friend, if he were honest with himself, though he was much older. Professor Snoke told him that all men of true power were alone, and his isolation now would only make him greater later. Words to placate a confused adolescent, he was sure, but he took comfort in them anyway. His Professor had never lied to him, unlike most of the people in his life. Finally, he drifted into a restless sleep.
Chapter Summary

Quick warning, this chapter has dark themes of physical violence, sexual abuse and intimidation, as well as consensual dom/sub relationship dynamics - please don't read if you find these things upsetting!!

The second time that Rey caught Eliza Montgomery and Ben Solo alone in the woods, she didn't forget her book bag. In fact she had left it at the cottage and come back with just her maths exercises to do, sitting high up in the branches, the earthy smell of the soil and sharp tang of pine bringing her a sense of peace and balance. She was absorbed in an example, working backwards to try and figure out the method when she heard them coming.

Ben was angry, she could feel it in her chest in a strange way, as thought the energy he sent out was coded messages that she could read. An aura of suppressed rage surrounded him, he seemed to vibrate with it, though only thinned lips and flashing eyes gave it away in his countenance. That power, vitality and power compressed by sheer force of will made her mouth dry for some reason and she suddenly had an insight that a grown Ben Solo would not be a man to mess around with. Eliza followed closely behind her hand reaching out now and again to grab his arm, though this did nothing to slow him until he reached the wide base of the oak where she was tucked away.

"Ben, please, don't be angry" she breathed, standing in front of him, swishing her hair over her shoulder and pouting. Rey watched with interest as Ben looked her up and down, his face an unreadable mask.

"I didn't mean to let her see, I know the rules. She went in my purse for something and I forgot it was in there, and then she was pulling it out, reading the name. I took it away from her before anyone else could see"

"But she saw. I told you Eliza, that you couldn't keep the credit card if anyone found out I was bankrolling you. I don't want it to be known" he snapped harshly.

"Do you think I do?" Eliza cried, and suddenly Rey could see a vulnerable layer to the distainful denial on the girls face, and she wondered if maybe it had been deliberate, whatever slip up they were discussing.

"No need to remind me of how very ashamed we are of each other. You were careless " he said coldly.

"Yes. I was careless, and I'll take the consequences" she said quietly. Ben tilted his head, his anger simmering down now to a focused point.

"What consequences?" he asked darkly.

"Whatever consequences you think appropriate" she said back, and Rey watched as Eliza's body language shifted, her hands falling to her sides, her head lowering, her eyes too, as she became a picture of submission before him. Ben watched her impassively.
Then he reached out a hand and touched her chin. His grip was hard. He rubbed his fingers along the smooth bone before sliding them across her lips. Eliza's mouth opened immediately, and Ben's finger fell inside.

Rey squirmed, suddenly aware of what an intimate scene she was being privy to. After a long pause, Ben moved his finger deeper into Eliza's mouth, causing her to moan, and the sound sent all the hair on Rey's body standing on end.

He gentle drew the hair back from Eliza's shoulder, and started to whisper something into her ear. Her peachy complexion slowly turned red, her eyes lidding and her breath becoming heavier around the finger. Rey was completely transfixed by the expression on her face. It was needy and yearning, and in sharp contrast with the impassive and unfeeling expression on Ben's face. Rey realised then, this might very well be simply an unfeeling arrangement for Ben, but perhaps Eliza had a different take. Despite her haughtiness and her popularity, at that moment, she looked like she would tell the rest of the school to go to hell for Ben Solo.

"Do you understand?" Ben said quietly, jolting Rey back to the present. Eliza nodded shakily.

"Yes. I understand"

"Good. Now get out of my sight" he instructed at last, and it was with reluctance that Eliza turned and left. Rey sat paralysed in the tree. She desperately didn't want Ben to know she was there, couldn't stand the embarrassment of meeting his eyes after that highly charged scene. His energy had lessened now, the fury spent, though the other energy remained, that one of isolation, and she had never found him without it. Her heart was pounding so hard, she almost thought he had heard it at one point, when he paused a moment in the gathering dusk, looking back into the growing shadows, before striding after Eliza.

At the first meeting for the Insorto Heights and St Augustine collaboration, Rey found she had been right about Finn. He was, simply put, the best person she had met in the last 6 months, and she desperately hoped when the project was over, they'd remain friends. Friends were something she'd never really had. She'd never had a proper home for them to come over to, or attended school enough to make any. Any friends she might have made that were neighbours moved too quickly before a bond could form and her mother had certainly never any acquaintances with kids.

There wasn't any time needed with Finn however. From the first 10 minutes of the meeting, where Finn brought out the food he'd brought for them to share and a playlist he had made as a soundtrack to the meeting, she was sold. He was warm and open, and some reason, seeing his easy smile made her think of Ben Solo, and her failed mission to become his friend. Finn was happy and funny, while Ben was angry and sarcastic. Finn pulled her in and tried to make her comfortable while Ben seemed to push everyone away and put them on edge. She didn't know why she was making the comparison, it wasn't like he had shown any interest in her since the apology after class. She had an inkling that it had something to do with the woods, and what she had seen.

Rey was no stranger to the concept of sex, living with her mother had certainly exorcised any hint of romanticism she may have associated with the act. However, she knew she was fairly naïve as it came to actual experience, having never even been kissed. Seeing Eliza and Ben in the woods had changed something in her, opened something inside. A curiosity. Suddenly, someone she had previously seen as a peer to her more or less, with both feel still firmly rooted in adolescence had become something more, a boy-man, someone sexual, and she had no idea what to do with that. Her coping strategy at the moment was to ignore it, and so she did.

"So, what's your story anyway? Finn asked, one afternoon.
"How come you go to St Augustines?" he'd asked, and Rey knew he meant when she was so clearly not the same as the others. She told him the abbreviated version.

"Your mother died? That's really rough. I'm sorry" he said, empathy shining through in the way he put his hand atop hers.

"Its ok, it was a while ago" she blustered.

"6 months isn't that long" Finn pressed, and Rey felt her throat close for a moment, before nodding.

"What about you? What's your story?"

"Foster care. Bounced around until I was 14 and then got lucky, well relatively. My foster family is nice enough, they've got a few other kids, so there's always someone around and it doesn't feel…"

"Lonely" Rey finished for him, and they shared a smile of experiences.

Winter break was coming up and Rey couldn't wait. The first project Finn and her were working on was a joint dance between the two schools. It would be held at Insorto Heights, as Kendsho had not even allowed the idea of holding it within school grounds at St Augustines. Probably none of her schoolmates would go, but the offer was open for them. Rey herself would be going, and she was excited. Her first dance, and she was looking forward to spending time with Finn and meeting his friends.

The last half of the year, since she'd started school had stretch endlessly and she longed for days when she could go to the woods alone and draw uninterrupted for hours. It was the thought of the upcoming holiday that lowered her guard, plus the fact that Hux had seemed to lose interest in her of late and generally she seemed to have finally found a way to stay under everyone's radar.

Maybe it was the upcoming holiday, or maybe it was because of her burgeoning friendship with Finn but somewhere in the last few weeks, she had stopped being careful, and someone had noticed.

The last swim practice of the year had an especially holiday feel about it and Rey could admit to herself she was having a nice time. She had improved, she could properly do the strokes and stay under water and the achievement of it felt great. She wasn't used to being praised, so when the teacher took her aside at the end and told her he was impressed, she shifted uncomfortable even while hugging the words to her heart. She couldn't wait to go home and tell Jack. As she picked up her towel and wandered toward the locker room, she found herself surprised by that thought. It seemed that somewhere in the last few months, she had begun to think of her uncle as family, and even started to look forward to the pride in his eyes when she did well. She smiled softly to herself as she got her things out her locker, glad the other girls had gone, though she was becoming less and less awkward about changing in front of them. It seemed that a diet of actual food on a regular basis was finally making an impact, as her natural slender body began to take on a little shape. It was faint, probably unnoticeable to anyone else, a little deeper indentation of her waist, and flare of hip, a softening of the inside of thigh and slight swell of her breasts. The locker next to hers was hanging open, and she saw inside a compact mirror, silver and studded with sparkling stones. She stilled, her hand itching to grab it. The other things from the locker had gone, and knowing her classmates, they wouldn't be worried about losing something so small. She reached out and opened it. Her reflection was fractured in the surface, a fine cobweb of cracks spreading across the surface. Decision made, she stuffed it deep into her bag. She knew these girls, there is no way they'd keep a broken compact, it was just trash to them.
She wiggled out her clinging swimsuit and wrapped her towel around her chest, grabbing her bag with shampoo and shower gel and turned toward the shower block.

It was quiet as she reached down to put her stuff on the floor and hang her towel up, just the occasional drip of water. She reached out and turned the tap on with a sharp twist. The hot steamy water streamed down her, and she felt her muscles relax as she tilted her head back into the spray. Her eyes were closed, her ears full of the sound of the shower running hard down on her, but she suddenly felt a tendril of cold snake around her ankle. It sent gooseflesh creeping up her legs, and she wondered if someone had come in. Opening her eyes, she looked at the fogged glass of the stall, rinsing shampoo out her hair, her ears strained to hear.

For a long moment, there was nothing, and then, just when she was able to relax, she heard it. The soft squeak of a shoe on a wet tile. Swallowing, she turned off the shower, needing to be able to hear. Silence surged in after the drumming of water, and she was able to hear, the soft squeaking of feet walking quietly on the floor, someone who didn't want to be heard. She considered her options, and found them all to be lacking. She was probably overreacting she told herself as she eased her hand out the stall for her towel, keeping the door as closed as possible. It was probably some girl who had forgotten something and come back. Her fingers met the cold hard hook outside the shower where her towel should've been, coming up empty.

She heard the sound before she could tell where it was coming from, a clicking sound, a camera. Her head shot up and she saw a smart phone being held over the top of the shower stall, the flash blinding her in the relative darkness of the shower block.

"What the hell?" she swore, pushing the door open, her heart in her mouth. Some mean girl was taking a picture of her in the shower and now they were going to pay. Her mouth dried up as she came out the shower, and saw Hux, leaning against the opposite wall, his phone tucked into his pocket, an insufferably smug expression on his face, her towel in his hand. She registered that she was naked, and that he was perusing her body in a long slow sweep. She felt her blood well up behind her skin, her whole body burning in mortification, even as she ground her teeth and resolved not to let him see how much he'd rattled her.

"Well, well, seemed even gutter rats take showers, now and again" he sneered as she simply heard her hand up to him.

"Give me the phone" she said calmly, though she felt anything but. He smirked.

"Why would I do that?" he asked, his face creasing in genuine puzzlement.

"No, I don't think I will be doing that. I think there's some other people who would love to see the daughter of a whore who dares to walk the halls alongside us, then there's social media of course, and then the kids at Insorlo Heights, I bet they'd love to see more of the school's Liaison."

"Don't speak about my mother" she snapped, and then bit her tongue as she saw how he pounced on it, looking for ways to draw blood.

"Your mother the whore you mean? I read all about her... weren't you found with her dead body? How long was she gone before you called it in?" he asked, his eyes taking on a dark fascination.

"You're sick" she whispered and meant it, seeing the dark light in his eyes.

"You're just like her, I can tell. You pretend not to be, pretend to fit in, but you're a feral cat, in heat. I saw you... steal that compact" he breathed coming closer. Fear shot through her at the sight, her mind suddenly recalculating the risks. She had thought maybe he just wanted to humiliate her,
but now, with the light in his eyes, she felt a real, more genuine fear.

She took a step back, and felt her fears confirmed as his smile deepened. Without another thought she shot backwards back into the shower and slamming the door, the thick glass juddering against her hands, mere moments before Hux pressed his own hands against it.

"Let me in Rey. Come on, don't think I haven't noticed you watching me, wanting me. Let me in, and I'll delete the photo and I won't tell anyone that you've probably been stealing from us this whole year" he murmured.

"You're insane, you're making me feel sick, you disgust me" she grunted, pushing her whole body against the door as she felt Hux do the same. A thrill of fear went through her at his words. She had been stealing, it was true, and if everyone found out, she didn't know what would happen to their charity.

"Sure I do… I know, it's all part of the game." He said as he threw his considerable weight behind the door and Rey stepped back at the last minute. Surprised by the sudden lack of opposition, Hux crashed into the room, swearing as he slipped on the wet floor, and Rey stepped over his prone form and darted for the door. She wove through the lockers, her heart pounding in her chest and her harsh breath the only sound in the silent room, over Hux's cursing and the sound of him coming after her.

She reached the locker room door. She hesitated a moment, scared of running naked into the hall, and then realising she had no choice as she heard heavy footsteps coming behind her. She wrenched open the door, even as she saw his arm reach out to slam it closed.

The hall way was deserted. Tugging the door back and forth between them, she summoned her loudest scream and let it pierce the air.

"Help!" she screamed as she glimpsed someone turned a corner far down the hall, too far.

Dressed in black, head down and earbuds in, Ben was not pay attention, hunched in he usually was, she willed him to look up.

"Ben!" was her last shout, echoing down the hall as Hux managed to grab the door from her and push her backwards. The door slammed hard, and he turned, blocking her from it, breathing hard. She watched him warily, before turning and attempting to shot toward the pool access. He anticipated her however, and his hand snapped out and grabbed her hair, yanking her back. Her wet feet finally slipped and she went down hard, her back meeting the tile with a crack.

"You fucking bastard" she swore as she tried to roll to her feet. He put a booted foot on her stomach, pressing her into the floor. She saw his face then and realised that this chase, her resistance, was exciting him. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, and she saw him throw a wade of notes at her naked form.

"Here, how much will it take, what was your mother's going rate?" he sneered, and she felt cold to her very core.

She didn't have to answer, because just then, like an angel of vengeance, Ben Solo burst through the door of the locker room, and the expression on his face froze Hux to the spot.

He walked in, and the temperature of the air falling several more degrees. Rey flopped back, her breath rushing out. She might not have spoken to him in a month, but she was sure he would help her. The relief she felt at seeing him crashing through her.
"Interrupting something, am I?" he said, his voice was flat. Hux huffed nervously.

"You are actually." He said, and Rey swore, attempting to get to her feet, before realising that Hux still had his foot planted on her. She let out a whoosh of breath as it compressed her.

"Get your foot off her. Now" Ben said quietly, with such implied malice, Rey watched Hux swallow uncomfortably. He stepped off her her arms crossing defensively across his chest.

"It's just a misunderstanding." He said, stepping back. Ben nodded pensively.

"I see. Rey?" he said, a question.

"He took pictures" she said and watched as Ben held out a hand to Hux. Hux huffed.

"I saw her stealing from other girl's lockers, the evidence is in her bag" he complained as Ben simply continued to hold his hand out.

"Fine, I'll delete them, It's not there's anything to see anyway" he grumbled, taking his phone out his pocket. Ben grabbed it, lightening quick and dropped it to the tile floor. He lifted his heel and brought it smartly down on the large screen, smashing the glass. He then picked it up, ignoring Hux's protests and pulled the sim out of the wreckage, slipping it into his pocket.

"You'll pay for that"

"And you'll pay for this" Ben promised, looking at Hux with such violence, Hux stepped backwards.

"Be glad it's not your face, for now" he said, turning away from Hux, effectively dismissing him, turning his attention onto Rey, his granite features softening. Hux, seeing his opportunity, made for the door, cursing Ben all the way. As he made to step through, Ben called out to him.

"Hux? Watch your back" he said, and there way a dark promise to those words.

Rey shivered looking at him, now crouched beside her. The whole exchange had barely taken seconds, and she suddenly remembered that she was naked and cold. He turned to her, his eyes on her face. The silence was charged as Rey put one hand to the $20 stuck to her wet shoulder, peeling it off. Ben stood before her, unsure of whether to leave or stay, to turn away or not. Bracing her hand on the wet tile, she pushed herself up, standing on legs which ceased shaking pretty quickly, all things considered. Her towel was lying across the room on the floor, and he straightened, striding over to it, sweeping it up and returning it to her, holding it out carefully, but coming no closer, doing nothing to threaten her personal space. She met his eyes then, standing, naked, her youthful body glistening in the low lights, holding her hand out for her towel with all the poise and confidence of a queen. She didn't blush, or drop her eyes, and neither did he. He felt he owed her that. She took the towel, and carefully wrapped it around her body, looking for all the world as though she were only doing it because she felt like it, not because she had just been left naked on the floor from an attack. With quiet pride, she stepped forward and picked up the other fallen bank notes, carefully sorting them, and tucking them deep into her palm.

"Rey, are you alright?" he broke the silence, and watched as emotions chased across her face, as she decided on which one. Finally, she shrugged.

"Sure" she murmured.

"Are you sure he didn't… hurt you?" he probed further, feeling his earlier feeling of wrath reappearing at how young and innocent she seemed, standing before him. A lamb led into the lion's
"Just – my pride. A couple of months ago I never would have let him get the jump on me" she said, ripping a hand through her hair, a gesture that made the damp locks stand up.

"You should report him. I can do it for you, if you want" he said. She was already shaking her head

"What's the point. He won't try that with anyone else here, and I'll never be that dumb again. I forgot for a second… and I won't again." She said, a steely note creeping into her voice as her gaze hardened.

"Forgot what?" he couldn't help asking.

"That I don't belong here." she said tightly, before she turned toward the half open locker.

"If you don't mind, I'm just going to finish up here and go back to Jacks."

"You mean home?"

"Sure" another shrug.

"Well, take care of yourself kid. I can't always be in the right place at the right time. " he said, pausing when she called his name softly.

"Ben… don't call me kid anymore. Ok?" she requested gently before she turned back to her locker and he felt her dismissal.

She didn't tell anyone about it, not Finn and certainly not Jack. Jack would go to the Principle and then it would all come out, about her sticky fingers and Ben's involvement. She just wished it would all go away.

That afternoon, as she was opening her locker, a note fell out, and stiffening, suddenly afraid of what it might be, she opened it.

_Fancy a walk in the woods? B_

She stared at it, her heartrate picking up at his elegant script, at the thought of him writing it just for her. She was aware of a dangerous sort of interest developing around Ben Solo. Maybe it was his illusiveness, his aloofness with sudden hints of charisma, the blatant desire she had seen on Eliza's face as Ben had whispered in her ear, but she was aware that she was thinking of him far more than she should, and that was before he had shown up in the locker room. He was a puzzle, angry and surly with the world, teasing and protective with her, and she found she liked it. She liked being treated differently, she liked it too much. She had always been drawn to the misfits and outcasts, probably because she was one herself, or more, she felt an echoing loneliness in him, as deep as her own, and she found comfort in its reflection.

Before she made for the woods, she stopped in the bathroom and smoothed her hair into her customary three buns, tucking away fly away hairs, before running out to her oak tree. She found him already there and waiting. He was sitting at the base, his back against the trunk, elbows on his knees. His expression lightened as he saw her coming along the path. She sat down beside him, crossing her legs and snatching up handful of pine needles to play with.

"You got my note?" he said, and she frowned.
"You left me a note?" she asked, then smiled at his confusion.

"Very funny. How are you?"

"Good, looking forward to Christmas. I've asked Santa to give me the gift of being one year closer to getting out of here, and I'm pretty sure he's going to come through" she said breezily. Silence fell between and she could practically hear him struggling to speak.

"And with… the other thing?" he prodded gently. She groaned and lowered her forehead to her knees.

"Please don't bring up the other thing. You saw me naked. Great. Like Hux said, there's not much to see anyway, I'm sure it's really quite forgettable, so feel free to go ahead and do that" she said, glancing a look at him through her lashes. If she had thought he looked awkward before it was nothing compared to how he looked now. Her words made his eyes darkened with anger.

"There was plenty to see" he bit out, before realising what his words meant and correcting himself

"Not that I was looking, or I remember-" he said and Rey threw her hands over her face, feeling her cheek scorch her palms.

"Stop, this is excruciating!" she groaned. He caught her hand, and she stilled, suddenly so nervous she couldn't breathe.

"What I mean is, I am sorry that you were in that situation and I still think you should make a complaint against him. But you should know… Hux was wrong. There's plenty to see… you are something to see Rey, and don't listen to the poisonous words of that… predator." He finished and she was robbed of words. Ben was telling her she was beautiful, or was he? She wasn't sure, she had to go over what he had said and try and understand it.

"I can't. As you know, my little scavenging adventures mean he has leverage over me" she muttered.

"Yeah well, picking up the odd object no one would miss isn't the same as try to –" Ben cut off as anger squeezed his throat. His hands bunched into fists on his knees. Hux's card was marked, and he'd get him, sooner or later, but it would be at a time when it wasn't connected to Rey, so she wouldn't get any of the fall back.

"Seriously, don't make such a fuss. It's hardly news worthy. It happens to girls all the time, every day. It's just life" there was a knowing in her tone that had his fingernails cutting into his palms at her casual assumption, at the implications it held for her life before she came to live at Jacks. It made him furious at her easy acceptance of sexual predators and abusers and he fought the urge to tell her that she should shout it from the rooftops, tell everyone she could until the world stopped looking the other way, and that he would shout it alongside her.

"Anyway, I'm sure you didn't ask me here just to tell me how beautiful I am" she prompted, and he was surprised into laughing.

"Indeed I didn't. Thanks for steering back to the topic" he said warmly and she felt that earlier tension reduce a little.

"No problem… so?"

"I thought I'd offer, over the Winter, if you're still looking for some Math help, I could tutor you" he said, and grew awkward at the ensuing silence that followed. He suddenly felt vulnerable,
putting his offer out there, wavering tentatively in the wind. The frustration that followed, that this tiny slip of a girl who he barely knew was making him nervous.

"Why?" she asked and he could clearly guess her fear. He was doing it out of pity. Because she'd been attacked and he had saved her, and now he felt sorry for her. Which, if he was honest with himself, was most of the reason. The other part of the reason was more difficult to pin down, maybe that he admired her strength, her refusal to be cowed, to lose her light in the face of adversity, and the thought of not seeing those glimpses of her as she capered about school for 3 whole weeks was a little depressing.

"My tutor, he thinks it would be good for my development to teach someone else, by going over some past work with you, I'd understand it better too, brush up" he explained, all lies, Professor Snoke had no idea that he was offering to tutor someone, but Rey smiled at his response.

"So, I'd really be doing you a favour?" she asked brightly, and he rolled his eyes.

"I wouldn't go that far, how about it could be mutually beneficial to both of us?" he said, resisting the urge to brush back a lock of hair that had falling across her forehead and into her eyes.

"Like friends with benefits?" she said, turning to face him, and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. He huffed out a laugh and saw Rey raised her fingers to frame her eyes, before pressing an imaginary button on top.

"What's that?"

"Mental picture, Ben Solo laughing, never seen before footage, it has to be captured" she said, relaxing back against the trunk of the tree and crossing her legs at the ankle.

"Where?" she asked at length

"Where ever you want"

"The library?"

"It'll be closed over Winter break"

"The public one wont" she argued, and shot an incredulous glance at him.

"You didn't know there was a public one?" she asked

"Of course, I knew, I just don't know where it is, or the hours" he said lamely, and she threw her head back and laughed heartily. It was a nice sound, Rey laughing, and he immediately missed it when it had faded from the air.

"Jacks?" she offered, swallowing the pride that threatened to wither and die at Ben Solo seeing her house. He seemed to sense that and made it easier on her.

"Let's try the library, it's there for a reason, right?"

"Are you sure you'll be able to find it?" she teased.

"I'm sure my sat nav can" he replied snappily.

"What about payment?" she asked as an after-thought.

"You're helping me out, remember?" he said as they started back toward the school.
Chapter Summary

Thank you so much for the kudos and reading this little fic.
Again warning for the BDSM stuff
Pretty fluffy chapter... if only it could last ))

Uncle Jack had bought Rey a dress for the dance at Insorto Heights. Rey started at it, hanging on her wardrobe door. It was pink. She didn't know what to think about it. She had mentioned something about needing a dress to wear to the dance and she hadn't even realised he had been listening really, and then, one afternoon, he'd brought it in, smiling proudly. She looked at the dress again. It was midi length, with an off the shoulder sweetheart neckline. And it was pink.

She snapped a picture of it with her phone and send it to Finn, who only sent back an emoji of someone rolling on the floor laughing. It didn't improve her confidence. She sat back against her pillows, slowly turning until she couldn't see the marshmallow coloured netting in her peripheral vision and scrolled through their messages. Finn was her friend, it was official. She had a friend. She looked through her meagre contact list. Jack, Finn and a new entry. Ben. Her fingered hovered over the name, still surprised to see it there. He had programmed it into her phone on the way back from their walk in the woods, to organise the tutoring over the break, he'd said. Which meant she hadn't texted him about anything non-school related, even if she'd wanted to. What she wanted to say to him, she had no idea, but just the thought that his number was right there meant she kept composing witty observations or joke to send, and wondered if she sent it at that moment, what mood he'd be in. Would he be moody Ben, the most common incarnation, bordering on sullen, needed a great amount of tenacity and cheer to draw out, or would he be teasing Ben, gracing her with that rare smile, and a laugh that sounded far too rusty. Or, the last and worst Ben, violent Ben. Ben Solo liked to fight, and that fight in the gym wasn't the only one she'd seen him in. He was taking the martial arts class seriously, and trained hard, drinking in the moves and repeating them with an accuracy that made his awkward gawky phrase drop away for a moment. She liked to watch him practice. She wondered if he and Hux had ever had it out, but knew that it wasn't his battle to fight for her. Now, tonight she was getting ready for a dance. Finn was picking her up, and she knew she'd better make an effort. She showered and washed her hair, eschewing her usual practical hairstyle for just leaving it down and loose around her shoulders. She had a ratty collection of cheap make up, and spent a few minutes blending on a glittery golden eyeshadow and rimming her eyes with brown kohl. The last time she had worn make up, her mother had still been alive. That solitary thought brought a lump to her throat, and she dropped her hand onto the dressing table and breathed deeply until the urge to cry passed.

Deliberating over shoe choice was more difficult. Like a man, uncle Jack had not thought what she would wear with her pink dress. Her options just now were pretty limited to sneakers or combat boots. In a panic she grabbed her phone and typed away:

*Do sneakers or boots go better with the pink dress nightmare? Any chance barefoot is the new black?*

She chewed her lip as she regarded her slim offerings, and heard her phone ping behind her. Grabbing it up she went to read Finn's reply, and her blood froze.
I'd personally advise against barefoot, given that there's snow on the ground, but I'd need to see the dress to really decide.

The tone was all wrong, and there were no emojis. Finn always used emojis. With trepidation, she raised her eyes to the top of the screen and saw her fear realised. Ben Solo. She had been mooning over his name, and forgotten she had come out of her conversation with Finn. She had texted Ben, out of the blue, about her pink dress, and he had responded. She didn't know what to make of that.

She reflexively threw her phone away, like it was a toy snake that had come alive in her hand, before scrambling over the bed and grabbing it. She made sure to go to Finn's name and retexted him. Her phone pinged and she steeled herself to look down at it.

**Going somewhere nice?**

She just started at it. Was he starting a conversation, why was he asking? Was he just being nice? Should she say it was a mistake, or would that be rude. She chewed her lip some more as she deliberated. Finally, she typed out a message and hit send.

**Dance collaboration over at Insorto, sort of helped to organise so have to go.**

She cringed straight away at the message. It was too informative and factual, it wasn't funny and she hated it. Her phone pinged again and she saw Finns reply about stealing some of his fosters sisters shoes for her to wear.

She finished getting ready and went through to the sitting room. Jack was watching football on TV and stood up as she went in. He liked the dress, and that made her feel guilty about hating it. She chatted to him and waited for Finn, who was right on time. As she made the introductions and put on the borrowed shoes, gold ballet flats, she tried to ignore the part of her that was listening out for her phone.

**Insorto Heights wasn't that far from St Augustines, in terms of distance, but in all the rest, it was a world away.**

A high barrier fence ringed the concrete slab building, as sprawling as it was and circled the bleak tarmac areas surrounding the school. The inside was huge, wide corridors for funnelling thousands of students at bell change and large, utilitarian lockers and benches. Everything had a faintly industrial feel to it, and there wasn't much in the way of comfort, but it was definitely functional. Finn looked smart in a shirt and nice trousers, and she wrapped her hand around his elbow as he steered her through the doors, pink and blue balloons decorating the vast hall. There was a DJ set up on the stage and drinks and food at the other end. People were milling about on the dancefloor, though no one was quite dancing yet.

"Come on, I want to introduce you to my posse" he said with a smile, taking her hand. She followed him, staring down at his fingers around hers.

"Finn! Finally, let me meet the new girl" a confident make voice demanded and Rey looked up into a smiling face with twinkling brown eyes.

"I'm Poe, it's great to meet you Rey" he said, pulling her in for a hug and ignoring her hand sticking out in front of her.

"You know my name" she said, laughing as Poe clapped Finn on the shoulder.

"Considering this one hasn't stopped going on about you for weeks, I should hope so."
"Hey man – be cool" Finn warned with mock severity, and made Rey relax. She turned to the other girls standing there.

"Hi, I'm Jessika, but I go by Jess" one of them said, smiling warmly at her. The other girl smiled too, though it was a little more strained, and she spoke quietly.

"I'm Rose, nice to meet you Rey. Finn really has been going on about you" she said, a glance flickering down at their hands, which Rey realised in alarm were still joined.

"It's really nice to meet you all" she said, causally taking her hand out of his grip on the pretence of checking her phone. As she did, she saw she had a new message. Her heart caught in her throat as she locked it and forced herself to forget it just now.

"What do you think about this whole collaboration then? I have to say, I thought we were going to get to come to St Augustines and eat caviar and swim in their pool. Finn, you really are doing a shit job of representing the student body" Poe was complaining.

"Maybe next time" Rey promised as she looked around.

"Seems like a good turn out here though! I just wish more St Augustine students had come" she said, wincing as she failed to recognise a single one.

"Well, there you go, you wish it, and it happens!" Finn suddenly exclaimed, looking towards the entrance. Rey turned to see and felt her stomach sink.

There at the door stood Armitage Hux and a group of his cronies.

"Friends of yours?" Jess asked, as Hux found Rey's face in the crowd and gave her a little wave, before moving into the room with his friends, his cruel smile burnt across Rey's vision.

"I wouldn't exactly say that" Rey muttered, before turning away, her eyes burning a little. Asking for the way to the bathrooms meant that Jess and Rose volunteered to show her, and before long, she was standing in a queue going out the door of girls all in sparkly dresses and heels, the smell of hairspray and perfume thickening the air as she leant against the wall and looked at her phone again.

Well, don't sound too excited. I am beginning to think I'm a bad influence. You should enjoy yourself

She typed out her reply quickly, her heart still racing, thinking about Hux being here. Was it just a coincidence, there was no way he had come just to antagonise her? Or finish what he started, but with backup this time, a tiny fearful voice whispered in her head.

I was planning to, but looks like any chance of that is gone. Hux and his friends just showed up.

She stowed her phone away again, and moved into the empty cubicle that had just opened. As she was finishing up, she felt her phone start to vibrate.

**Ben Solo calling**

She panicked and almost dropped it down the toilet as she scrambled to answer it.

"Hello?" she asked tentatively.

"Rey, you should ask your friend to take you home, or call your uncle. You shouldn't stay" he said
immediately, a commanding tone to his voice that instantly rankled.

"I don't want to leave. I want to enjoy the dance"

"There'll be other dances"

"Not like this one, not that I can just go and enjoy without all you insufferable St Augustine snobs" she said defensively.

"And besides… I've never been to a dance before"

"Well, neither have I, but I hardly think that's a reason to put yourself in a vulnerable position" he said.

"What? You've never been to a dance? You, Mr Sociable? I'm shocked." She snarked, biting her lip as she considered his advice. She heard him take a long breath, before he said her name quietly.

"Rey. I'm worried why Hux is there. It's not worth the risk." He said, reasonably. She was shaking her head silently, regretting having told him at all.

"It's fine, don't worry about me, I'm not alone here anyway, and I can take care of myself" she said firmly.

"Rey"

"It's fine Ben. It's not your job to protect me. Go get back to whatever you were doing. Have a nice weekend" she said shortly, injecting energy and enthusiasm into her tone.

"I'll see you on Monday, at the library, right?" he asked finally, and she relaxed.

"Yep, see you then. Bye" she said quickly and hung up. She quickly left the stall and washed her hands, finding Jess and Rose waiting for her outside. Hux wouldn't corner her alone again, she wouldn't let him.

Ben placed his phone back down on the nightstand of the hotel he was in. The city stretched out below him, lights twinkling in the darkness, and he thought of Rey, a couple of hours away by car. Too far to help, not that she needed his help, or wanted it. But she was a kid, and one he was growing strangely fond of. He hoped she'd tell her friend what had happened so he'd be on guard too, but that was her choice to make.

A soft click pulled him from his thoughts as he turned to see Eliza had finished getting ready in the bathroom. It was the night of their arrangement, and he wasn't particularly looking forward to it. But he did have needs, have desires and bodily impulses, as strange as they might be. When they went unspent for too long, the anger got worse, he felt more volatile. He looked Eliza up and down, her young, slim body encased in some expensive black lingerie, adorned with strategic straps with bondage illusions. He thought about telling her it seemed to waste to borrow his money to buy lingerie that he didn't care about to wear for him, but didn't bother. Eliza wouldn't
understand. For her, it was all a sexy taboo game, a walk on the wild side with someone who didn't fawn over her. She didn't understand the need to control and dominate that writhed in him. The need for someone to place their life, their welfare in his hands. The need for someone to give him their absolute trust. For someone to care enough about him that they would.

His mind flashed for a moment to Rey, on the locker room floor, naked and trembling and so heartbreakingly trusting. She had trusted him to protect her, looked at him like he made the world for a moment, and he had thought about it more often than he should since. And then, he felt shame in his fantasy. What had happened with Hux had been a violation, and he had been witness to that. To derive any type of desire or pleasure from it was wrong. It was twisted, and he was already aware of how twisted he was, how wrong inside, and felt all the worse because of it.

Eliza approached, a pulse beating in her neck as she carefully waited for him.

"On the bed" he instructed and she hurried to obey. There was a bucket of ice by the side, and her eyes flickered over it, before looking back at him with longing. Eliza liked to shiver and burn, and Ben wanted to please her tonight. He wanted to end their arrangement, and he didn't expect her to take it easily. He was planning on offering to continue the money, which she needed after all. Eliza's father was being investigated for insider trading and hadn't been fast enough to hide his offshore accounts, resulting in her family being broke. No one knew, though they suspected. Her mother maintained the façade and it was a good one, but Eliza had been more pragmatic. She had approached Ben and offered him the arrangement, out of the blue. How she knew about him, he couldn't guess, but as he spent time with her, he came to realise that Eliza was no stranger to the desires of men, so much older than her 18 years. The last time they had been together, she had broken down after a particularly gruelling spanking and orgasm denial scene and admitted that she wouldn't mind never having money again, if only her father would be sent to jail. She was more broken than Ben had realised, and he had felt further cold creeping into his heart, realising that he had been taking advantage of a very ill girl. So, he had to end it.

If he had been a different kind of person, he could have offered her affection and love. Cared for her gently, cradled her, soothed her. But he was only himself, the broken child of a marriage between two people who had only every hurt each other. The inconvenient child who ruined his parents lives and stolen their freedom, sealed them together in never ending warfare. The awkward and charmless burden they had broken under. Professor Snoke had explained how some people are difficult to love, difficult to care for, so fundamentally broken are they. But, he told Ben of how to him, all his little broken pieces made a magnificent whole, stronger and truer than before. No one understood him, except Snoke. And Rey a voice whispered, treacherously denying his teacher. That was a thought he would never voice to his teacher, for instinctively he knew it would have terrible consequences.

"Ben?" Eliza asked softly, and he brought himself back to the bed and her. He brushed her hair back gently and she smiled softly at the touch. He picked up a cube of ice, and trailed it from her wrist up the inside of her arm, and she gasped softly, her arm twitching.

"Don't move – shall I tie you?" he murmured and saw a flash of excitement spark in her eyes, those dark depths.

"Do you want me to?" he asked, and moves for the ropes as she nodded. Thread ing the silken lengths around her wrists he saw her eyes close in supplication, and all her fears and inhibitions, all her pain and suffering fall away. She was his now, and she had given herself over, glad to be free of the burden. She wanted that, she needed it, as much as he needed to control someone, needed to have power over someone, needed someone to allow him the power. Together, they fed of each other's darkness and he let himself fall into that dim place inside where he was truly himself,
though his time, he couldn't quite manage it, as a small part was reaching out, listening for his phone.

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Rey scuffed at the snow on her boots, packed onto the edges of the sidewalk as she waited outside the library. She was worried Ben wouldn't know where it was. Her phone was in her pocket and she had two cups of black coffee in her hands. She didn't normally drink coffee, but something about it seemed like it was someone older people would do, so she had picked it up on the way. A Range Rover passed by, slowing a little where she was, and then turning into the lot. She followed it round the corner. Ben got out, looking ridiculously lanky next to the hulking car and grabbed a bag, locking up and joining her.

"Let's go" he said stiffly as he passed her, and walked through the electric double doors. Rey followed behind slowly, wondering what to make of his surliness, yet again. Ben commandeered a carrel, throwing his bag across the middle of the table before sitting down and looking up at her. She placed a coffee in front of him, and gave him a hopeful smile, wondering if he was already regretting offering to tutor her.

"A thank you" she said, gesturing to the coffee, which he seemed to be ignoring as he rifled through his bag, pulling out a thick Math text book and notepad. He made a noncommittal noise before setting the book down.

"Why don't we start with some algebraic equations, you show me how you're doing them, and I'll see what you're doing wrong"

"Erm, ok…” Rey said, feeling increasingly uncomfortable. She shook off her coat and gloves, pulled her hat off and set it on a chair, feeling her freshly washed hair slide around her shoulders. She leaned across him for a pencil, her hair brushing the bare skin of his forearm.

"Didn't you bring anything to study with? And don't you have a tie for that or something" he gestured vaguely at her head. She raised a hand self-consciously.

"No, why?"

"It's distracting" he grunted, sitting back, well away from her and crossing his arms across his chest. Breathing slowly through her nose, she looked down at the equation he had put before her, and started to write out the steps.

"Stop, why are you solving for x first?" he asked abruptly, scowling down at her page. She swallowed feeling her cheeks heat up.

"I always solve for x first" she said.

"Well, there's your first problem" his tone implied it was the first of many, and Rey felt her temper snap at the frustration in his eyes.

"Look, if you regret offering to help, its fine, you're released from your offer. I didn't come to you this time, you came to me, so stop taking it out on me – just tell me you don't want to do this and
She scowled at him, echoing his defensive posture. They glared at each other. He suddenly snatched up her phone, from where it lay on the table and pressed a button.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, grabbing it back.

"Just checking to see if it was broken"

"It's not, why?"

"I assumed it was, since I didn't hear from you after the dance or all weekend" he said flately, and she felt a tinge of guilt in her chest.

"Why were you expecting me to message you?"

"I don't know, Rey… maybe because you told me Hux had just shown up at the dance for no good reason expect to annoy you, a dance miles from your home with a bunch of people you don't know. A dance you swore you weren't leaving early. Maybe what happened in the locker room didn't phase you – but it bothered me, and I can't quite forget it so easily." He snapped, running hand through his hair. It was a customary gesture, she realised, as subconscious as holding the door open for her or pulling out her chair.

"I haven't forgotten. It did bother me. It does” she trailed off, unwilling to share that the incident was making it hard to sleep without nightmares.

"You were worried about me" she stated, seeing the frustration in his eyes and understanding it for what it really was.

"Hell yeah, I was worried, and I had reason to be" he bit out, a muscle flexing in his jaw, and she saw how it cost him, to have no control over something and be made vulnerable by it.

"I can't check in with everyone all the time –" she started, stopping as his flashing dark eyes cut to her.

"I'm not asking you to. But considering what happened and that I am probably the only other person who knows that Hux is a threat. I don't think a quick check in would go amiss… You thought I wouldn't think about it, wondering if you'd left, if he made it hard for you – hell, if I'd be worried he got you alone and finished what he started." He said roughly, and Rey avoided his gaze.

"You could have called me, if you were so worried" she said lamely, but knew it was a feeble attempt to deflect as she said it.

"Right." He said, taking a sip of his coffee, burying his face in the cup. Rey sat a moment, twisting the plastic stirrer on the lid either way, until it broke off in her hand. She didn't know why, but it hurt her pride to admit she had been wrong, selfish, not to consider him. She didn't like the thought that she had to answer to him, and even knowing that was an unfair way of seeing it, it rankled, being held accountable.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think. I'm sorry you worried. To be honest I didn't really think you'd give me a second thought after we hung up" she admitted, a hopeless part of her aware that it sounded like she was fishing for him to say something about how he thought of her, that she might be in his thoughts.
"Of course I'd worry… you're just a – you're young." He said, catching himself on the verge of calling her a kid again. She scowled at him.

"Not anymore, I'm 16 now" she said, a little grin playing at the corner of his lips.

"Wow, all of 16… ok, it's true, you are no longer young, you're practically an old hag" he said with a straight face, and she banged a fist into his shoulder.

"If anyone here is an old hag it's you – you're practically ancient"

"True, but men only get better – wiser, more handsome as they age… women peak much younger, in fact I'd say it's all downhill from here" he said solemnly, and she rolled her eyes at him.

"Whatever, let's do some maths, if you accept my apology?"

"I do, but only because it was so hard for you to say. I enjoyed it immensely"

"You're the worst. Now, if you make me feel stupid again, I'm going to punch you in the kidney, consider this fair warning"

After sitting in the library for a couple of hours, Ben insisted on stopping by a nearby coffee shop on the way home. He was going to drop her off, as she had taken the bus and it had started snowing. They sat in the window, listening to the Christmas music playing in the background.

"What's your favourite dessert?" he asked, starting at the laminated menu.

"Things with chocolate" she said immediately. He got up to order, and stared out the window at the falling snow. It was falling slowly, drifting down and flurrying about the street lights as the sky was already darkening at 4 pm. He came back and shuffled into the booth, blowing on his fingers.

"You need gloves" she remarked. He waved a hand dismissively and turned to look out the window too.

"What's your Christmas plans… do you celebrate it? Are you Jewish?" she rattled on, pausing as a smile tugged the corner of his full lips.

"I'm not Jewish and I don't really celebrate Christmas" he said, wrapping his hands around a cup of coffee the waitress was setting before them.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe we did when I was younger, but father travels a lot, and my mother too."

"What does she do?"

"She used to be in politics actually and then transitioned into charity and fundraising when she had me. I curbed her political ambitions. Now though, she's a pretty big deal on plenty of boards and committees. She prefers to stay in the City." He said. Rey thought of the couple for of hours' drive it was between St Augustines and New York.

"Do you go into the city to see her?"

"Sometimes, she's pretty busy" he said, not warming to the subject.

"Are you going to see Eliza during the holidays?" she asked, unsure why she kept pushing them
onto subjects that made his shields go up. His expression didn't change, he just regarded her over cup.

"Probably not."

"Why not?"

"Why yes?" he challenged back straight away.

"I thought she was your… girlfriend"

"I'm pretty sure I never said that"

"Ok, secret girlfriend"

"Nope"

"Friend with benefits?" she ventured, shifting uncomfortably under his intense scrutiny.

"Like you?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her, and she felt her cheeks flush red. She unwound her scarf from around her neck.

"It's hot in here." She muttered.

"It's not, but ok. Why are you asking about Eliza?" he pressed, shifting down in his seat, and she felt the brush of his long leg under the table for an instant, before it was gone.

"I don't know." She answered truthfully. It was like a sore tooth or canker sore, she couldn't stop niggling at it. He dipped his fingers into some spilled sugar on the table and swirled it around.

"I'm not seeing Eliza anymore. We ended our arrangement" he admitted. Rey gripped the leather seat under her tightly, her breath suddenly thin.

"Why?"

"It was time"

"You don't – need it anymore" Rey asked, the words awkward and clumsy in her mouth, inadequate for finding out what she really wanted to know. What had they done together? What had brought two people so different together? She burned to find out. It was like Ben held the keys to some secret, adults only club and he was holding them out of reach above her head.

"Somethings are more important than what I need. Why didn't you call me over the weekend, send a text, anything?" he suddenly asked. The suddenness of his question sent a real answer springing from her lips.

"I'm not used to anyone knowing my business. Not used to anyone caring. I've never had to answer to someone before."

"What about Jack?"

"Jack is not a very strict disciplinarian, he pretty much trusts me to do what I want, as long as I go to school" she said.

"What about before… with your mother?" he asked carefully and that tone set her mouth in a bitter smile.
"Again, not much of a ruler enforcer. In fact, it was more likely to be the other way around" she muttered, her gaze drifting toward the table, the past floating in front of her eyes. As always when it did, it robbed her words, shut down her senses, and the feeling of paralysis took up residence in her chest. Ben watched her, and realised in her lost expression, that there was so much there, so much trauma and pain, so much horror and Rey hadn't even started to unpack it yet.

"I can't quite picture you, disciplining anyone" he said softly, his gaze darkened as she lifted her hazel eyes to him, clouded with memories as she replied in a whisper.

"That's funny. I can picture you doing it. Easily" They stared at each other long moment.

"Why didn't you tell anyone it was your birthday?"

"Who says I didn't? Maybe I had a huge party, I just didn't invite you" she tried, and his expression showed her how sure he was she hadn't. That felt strange, that he was so sure of her already.

"I'm not used to anyone wanting to know. It doesn't suit me, doesn't quite fit. I'm much better…”she trailed off, searching for the word.

"Alone" he stated, and felt it slip into the hole in his chest. She gave him half a smile at that, an expression of a weary traveller coming upon another in a wild and lonely, desolate place.

The invisible boy who felt too much and nothing at all, and the forgotten girl who was really seeing him, all his inglorious self. Something shifted inside him at her gaze, at the honesty of it. That part of him that hid away, that dark and writhing thing that cowered from the light was exposed to the full beam of her strength. And she was stronger than him. It radiated off her, her strength, her tenacity and determination, just like anger and darkness wreathed him.

"Here you go, birthday girl!" a waiter announced as two of them approached the table, lowering laden trays. Rey tore her gaze from his to see the two servers placing dish after dish of desserts on the table, each adorned with a single candle.

"What's this?" she asked in surprise. Ben's face was softened in the glow of the candles, and she knew her smiled was reflected for once in his face.

"Things with chocolate. 16 things with chocolate to be precise. Happy birthday Rey" he said, before raising his fingers to frame his eyes and clinking the imaginary shutter.

"Speechless Rey. Never seen before."

She was aware of too many things all at once, all these elements fitting into place to create a perfect memory. The Christmas music, Judy Garland singing about troubles being far away, the steady fall of snow outside the window, glittering over the softly lit shops lining the street, the glow of the candles and Ben's smile.

"You shouldn't have" she whispered. She wanted to tell him to stop, stop being caring and enigmatic, illusive one moment and then everything the next. He was carving a place for himself inside her, and it was terrifying. She knew she was seriously in danger of developing a monster crush on the awkward misfit in front of her. They were a boy and girl on the verge of adulthood, and she knew that their paths in life would take them far from each other, and she didn't think she could stand being left alone by one more person.

"I definitely can't eat all these" she sighed as she sat back a little later, her stomach groaning.

"But you gave it a good shot. I'm impressed" he said, motioning to the server to pack up the rest.
He was strangely commanding at times, and Rey found she liked it, sitting back and letting him take charge. It was new and different for her. In her life, if she hadn't done something for herself, no one else would. It felt like a luxury, someone taking charge, she didn't have to worry.

They walked in silence toward his car, him carrying her take out boxes. He opened her door and helped her in, her boots skidding a little in the snow, before shutting the door and walking around to the driver's seat. He got in and put the heater on, rubbing his fingers together as he started the car. The ride back was quiet as she fiddled with the radio and looked out at the snowy countryside. The seats of the car were warm and it felt delicious as she let her eyes drift closed for a moment.

The lack of motion woke her, and she sat up to see the cottage. Ben was sitting in the drivers seat, his head tilted toward hers.

"Home" he announced into the still cool air inside the car, and she wondered how long they had been sitting there.

"Thanks. For the tutoring and coffee and everything" she mumbled, her brain foggy with sleep.

"My pleasure. Why don't we do it at mine next time? I'm tired of being shushed continually" he suggested. Rey stared at him a long moment before nodding.

"Ok, when?"

"Day after tomorrow? I have the place to myself until Christmas eve, then my parents are coming up, well, supposedly" he said with a wry smile. She nodded.

"Sounds good. I – I don't have your address…"

"I'll pick you up"

"I can take the bus" she protested and simply nodded as Ben shot her quelling look.

"See you at 10" he said. He waited until she was inside before pulling away, and Rey cursed every single gentlemanly move that Ben Solo seemed to find as natural as most people found breathing. She put her desserts in the fridge and told Jack to help himself as she wandered through to her room and threw herself on her bed. She desperately hoped this was not going to become a problem, while her heart warned that she was treading dangerous ground.

"Now come on Ben, this is ridiculous, you are distracted and unfocused." His mentor growled as Ben sat back, letting the formulae before him swim as they had been begging to do from the start.

"What is on your mind?" Snoke prompted. Ben ran his hand through his hair, pushing it back.

"Nothing, I'm just tired" he said.

"Then you must rest, my apprentice. Truly greatness cannot be built on weak foundations. Unless there is another reason for your weakness… one you haven't told me" Snoke probed, laying a hand on Ben's shoulder. He hid his flinch, his masters touch always loathsome for some reason.

"I believe you intended to break off your relationship with the Montgomery girl?" Snoke continued, and Ben swallowed hard. He hated discussing his private his with his teacher.

"I have. We have ended it."

"I see" Snoke said, walking behind him. Ben tensed, unwilling to turn his head and see where he
had gone. He could feel that he was still close.

"And what arrangements have you made to cope with your physical demands?" he said, closer than Ben had expected. He resisted jumping, as his professor would only seize on it as a sign of weakness.

"None, I haven't any need at present, I am fine alone"

"I am glad to hear it, for you shall always be alone, it is the only path to greatness. But the physical act of pleasure is an amusing diversion, and a necessary bodily function. Do not deny yourself Ben, the arrangement you shared with Eliza was a good fit for you. She did not threaten your heart, and yet, allowed you to fulfil your base desires" Snoke continued as he stepped back in front of Ben, and went to stand at the window.

"Physical passion and feelings, strong emotions, the combination of those are the very things that have molded your parents into selfish, cruel creatures, who would ignore and neglect the child who reminds them of their failings." He said calmly, even as Ben's heart tore a little more at the words.

"Stolen their greatness, robbed them of ever making a significant contribution to the world… being burdened by you, the product of their weakness, their love. It destroyed them" Snoke said, and Ben felt the truth of those words sink through him.

"I know" he said weakly.

"Good, now, let us return to the chemical formula directly, and I will see your brilliance shine through, I shall accept nothing less." Snoke said as he sat down beside him again, and Ben bend his head back to the notepad.
The next day, Rey stepped off the bus into a puddle of slush, and cursed, feeling the cold quickly seep through her so called winter boots.

"You have a terminal shoe problem" she heard Finn call as he hopped off the bench that he'd been waiting on. She hugged him hello, and stiffened for a moment when she felt his arms linger. She pulled back and affixed a bright smile to her face.

"So, where to? I can't believe you're doing your shopping the day before Christmas eve. Even I am more organised than you" he said as they navigated the icy pavements, swooping in and out of the many, many people streaming past.

"Don't remind me."

"Where first?"

"We're here" she said, pushing open the door of a pawn shop. Finn stepped in behind her, looking around with interest.

"This is definitely not where I thought you would be shopping" he said, as she went to the counter and drew something out her pocket.

"I'd like to know how much I can get for these" she said and passed a pair of earrings over to the man behind the counter. He looked at them, pulled out an inspection glass.

"100"

"100? These are real gold"

"100 is generous" the man warned. Rey chewed her lip a moment, and then nodded reluctantly.

"Ok. 100"

Stuffing the clash into her pocket she smiled tightly at Finn.

"Let's go" she said, stepping back out into the cold. Finn didn't ask about what she had pawned, just steered her in the direction of come good value stores.

She bought a new tool belt for Jack, as his was worn and fell down all the time. A lip gloss for Jess and a phone case for Rose with R2D2 on it, her favourite character from Star Wars. She sent Finn away at one point so she could buy him new ear buds, as he was rarely without a pair, and hated his current ones. She only had one present left to buy and dwindling funds to buy it.

"Is there any other stores that would sell men's things. Like more expensive ones?" she asked, as they stepped back outside, her skin tingling in the sudden transition out of the dry central heat.

"Sure, there are plenty. What are you looking for?"

"Gloves"
Rey was still standing in front of the mirror when she heard a knock at the door. Her freshly washed and dried hair was pulled back in a half ponytail. She was wearing a thick cable jumper over a thin cami, and tight jeans, with boots. She had cast a glance at the make-up, considered it for a long moment, and then decided against it. She felt like it was trying too hard, and thought that Ben might notice she was trying too made it out of the question. She went through to the sitting room and saw Ben, standing by the door, barely clearing the low cottage ceiling, chatting with Jack. She looked around the little room, seeing it through his eyes. The small collapsible Christmas tree with its glued-on decorations, faded wallpaper peeling at the ends, the dining room table top strewn with vintage radio parts Rey and Jack were slowly building back together.

"Rey, keep an eye on the weather. If it turns, come straight back home" Jack said, as she shrugged on her coat, feeling a little self-conscious at the way proximity to Ben made her cheeks heat up.

"We will, Sir" Ben said, and then they were outside in blinding winter sun, and eye tearing cold.

She realised how again how humble and small this little home must seem, to the boy from the richest family at St Augustines. She wondered if he could ever understand how much more it was than she'd ever had.

They rode along in comfortable silence, and Rey occupied herself looking at the neighbourhood out the window, peering at the homes from luxury condos to huge detached houses, set back from the road, behind high gates, bristling with security cameras. There was no one walking on the well-manicured sidewalks. Ben turned into a driveway, and a man from a security booth came out to greet him, before the heavy gates were opening before them.

"So you really came to get me because I wouldn't be allowed in without you" Rey muttered, sitting forward in her seat to look around as Ben drove slowly up a wide, winding drive. The rest of the city seemed to have falled away here, and she could see manicured gardens on either side as far as the eye could see. They passed tennis courts and a stable, and Rey, her expression incredulous, glanced at Ben, who remained unmoved, staring straight ahead.

She had known of course that the Solos were rich, rich beyond her imagining, though her imagining of riches were fairly limited, she could admit. But all this was so much more.

They pulled to a stop in front of the largest single dwelling she had ever seen. It looked like a castle, old stone, and windows, she even spied turrets. Ben parked and got out without a word. Though his expression portrayed a stoic boredom she had the sense of a strange energy coming off him. Nerves and maybe a little anger.

She blinked at him as he wrenched open her door and took her elbow so she didn't slip, certain her awe was on display as she hauled herself up and gripped her tatty backpack. She smiled tentatively.

"I didn't know you lived in a castle. Are you secretly a prince or something?" she asked, looking up to him, her head not even reaching his shoulder. He grimaced as he pulled her backpack from her and set it on his shoulder.

"Not even remotely"
"Good morning Sir" a man intoned suddenly, making Rey jump. Ben nodded to another security presence and propelled Rey through the doors and down into the foyer. She stopped dead in the middle, causing Ben to step into her back.

She turned around, her head tilted back, taking in the vaulted high ceilings and stained glass windows around the top, letting opal coloured light filter in. There was a stillness here, a peaceful emptiness, almost holy and church like. She wondered what it must be like to live somewhere so perfect and pristine, so quiet. She looked up to find Ben watching her, his face curious.

"It's beautiful here" she said simply.

"If you say so" he muttered.

"Let's go, I've not got all day" he grumped as he turned away, and she dutifully trailed after him, her eyes taking everything in, her fingers reaching out and touching the arranged flowers they passed, the knobbles of the art that floored her with its energy and colour. Ben didn't pause though, and she was given no chance to linger as she followed behind him.

"Where do you usually study?"

"In the study" he suggested, "You?"

"In my room." she said, her eyes still drinking in this peep into a world she could never quite have understood without seeing. He stopped and looked at her, indecision on his face.

"The study sounds nice" she suggested, and they were off again. They passed a room with the biggest Christmas tree she'd ever seen filling a generous alcove by the fire.

"You could fit a lot of presents under there" she said grinning, as she stepped into the room and touched one of the branches. The fresh smell of pine filled the air and the needles felt smooth and sharp all at once. Ben didn't reply, just leant against the doorway and watched her. She approached him and slipped her backpack off his shoulder and pulled out his gift. She placed it under the tree.

"First" she murmured as she stood up, suddenly self-conscious under his gaze.

"What?" she asked after a long moment of silence.

"That's not the family tree, not the one we use really."

"What's it for then?" Rey asked, nose wrinkling.

"Show. It's all for show" he said, walking into the room and picking up the small parcel she'd set down under the tree.

"For who?" Rey asked.

"Everyone. No one. It doesn't matter. None of this… matters" Ben said, gesturing his hand around the beautiful room. Something in Rey rebelled at his callus attitude.

"Well, sure, this tree doesn't spring up when you take it out the box, and its decorations aren't glued on… but it's still pretty nice" she said, knowing how defensive she sounded, comparing her and Jack's pathetic tree with one that was magnificent, and Ben dismissed as unimportant. He frowned, stepping closer to Rey.

"I didn't mean anything by that, about Jack's home."
"It's the first time I can remember having a tree at Christmas" Rey blurted out, trying to make him understand how lovely and lucky it was to be standing in front of the giant feat of nature. His expression softened at that, and she was afraid to see pity in his eyes, so kept her gaze lowered.

"And it's perfect. I would rather open presents around that tree, presents that mean something, with a family that cares, than have 5 showroom Christmas trees, presents bought by assistants and parents who can't stand each other" he said softly.

"But it's a luxury to even have that choice to make" she said then, raising her luminous eyes to his. He felt a pang in his heart and realised how selfish and petty he sounded. He'd prefer if his rich and healthy parents wouldn't fight when Rey thought he should be grateful he had them in the first place.

"All great people are alone" he found himself saying, Snoke's voice in his mind. It wasn't meant to hurt her, he meant it as a compliment. The moment was broken by the words, and Rey frowned, looking away, she picked her backpack up.

"We should get started"

"Right. Do you mind if I keep this in my room, open it myself on Christmas?" he asked as they started back toward the study.

"No, but only if you promise to wait" she ordered him, and he felt relief that that intensity in front of the tree had passed. He looked down at the carefully wrapped parcel in his hands, and felt a hint of excitement tug at him, at the thought of opening it.

It was the first present in a long time, he couldn't predict, something she had gone out and bought, just for him. She had been thinking of him. They reached the study and went in, Rey's exclamations over the stacks and collections making him smile. Surprising her and delighting her made his chest feel warm in a way he hadn't felt in a long time. He could vaguely recall a similar feeling, when he had laboured over a poem, painstakingly written in calligraphy with a tutor once, as a Mother's Day present. When Leia had opened the box, he had been so nervous and excited all at once. She had smiled at him warmly and he had felt the same strange softness in his chest. But then, she had put it back in the box, and he'd never seen it again, and the softness blew away like the down of a thistle.

He hadn't felt it since, he realised then, with his chest so full of, as he watched Rey dart from painting to painting on the walls. It was disquieting and uncomfortable in its beauty.

They studied quietly that afternoon, with only the crack of the fire for company. The fires were lit every day, in every room they had them, by the fleet of servants that kept the house running. Ben didn't know who it was for, as his parents were seldom in residence, and if Rey hadn't been there, he probably would have stayed to his room most of the time.

She had great concentration, he thought with admiration. Her focus was white hot, like a laser to the page. She pushed herself, enjoyed being challenged, and seeing if she would figure it out. She was gutsy and brave in everything she did, even tackling her so called weakest subject. She was a great student, he thought, seeing her through a tutors eyes.

Not Snoke's eyes though, no, never his.

He knew that his own tutor would find Rey too emotional and caring, on the edge of laughter when a problem defeated her, always a cheeky comment or a grin away from making him smile in response. His lips, so unused to smiling actually felt strange because of it. No, she was not Snoke's
preferred student at all.

Afterwards, she asked for a tour of the house, and he didn't deny her. There was a part of him that wanted to see the awe in her eyes, wanted her to appreciate his family's means. He couldn't consider too closely what that desire to impress her meant, just gave into the whim.

She was excited about the indoor pool they had below as well as the games room, with snooker and a small cinema screen.

"I should have told you to bring your bathing suit, and you could have used the pool after studying" he said as they made their way to the kitchen for lunch.

"What do you want to eat?" he asked, settling a hip against the counter top and watching her fiddle with the sleeves of her thick jumper. Her cheeks looked a little flushed, even as she twisted around, taking in even the cavernous kitchen with enjoyment.

"What do you normally eat?"

"Whatever's around"

"Well, what's around?" she teased, opening the huge double doored fridge. She peered inside.

"Everything. Everything is around." She said, sticking her head further in. He watched her a long moment as she entertained herself in the fridge.

"Are you coming back out?" he asked, laughing at the expression on her face.

"If I lived here, I'd get so fat!" she exclaimed as she let him pull the door further open.

"So.. nothing wrong with that. Help yourself to whatever" he said with a smile and she knocked him on the arm.

"Stop trying to feed me up!" she warned, turned around suddenly and playfully hitting him on the chest.

"Maybe I like feeding you up" he murmured. Suddenly, Rey realised that she was wedged between the fridge and his chest, with his arm around, holding the door open. She raised her eyes to his, up and up, and saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed, suddenly as aware as her of the rising tension.

"Well, feed yourself up first. I call the burritos" she said, nimbly snatching the first container she saw and ducking under his arm. She set in on the counter and hopped up onto the bar stool, watching Ben take out some sandwiches.

"Seriously, with all this food around, how are you that lanky?" she continued. Ben dropped next to her and took the wraps off the food.

"Lanky? I'm a growing boy… I'll grow into it" he said, starting to eat. Rey frowned as she considered that.

"Hm, but I think maybe you shouldn't, because that will make you…massive. Far too big. Bigfoot big" she said, her mouth full of food, raising her hands over her head for a second.

"Are you missing Eliza?" she asked suddenly, and the sudden direction change threw him for a second.
"No. Not really. I hope she's well, but other than that, no"

"What was your arrangement again?" she asked conversationally, and he smirked at her innocent expression.

"That's not for young ears"

"Young? You're only 2 years older than me" she huffed.

"Well, 2 years at this age is more than 2 years" he said.

"Considering girls mature faster than boys, I'd say we are about the same age then" she sneered. He bit down a smile at her persistence. She was so much younger than other girls her age, in so many ways, and in others, so much older. She had a bright, shining innocence and goodness, that was tinged on the edges with her darker experiences and losses. That dark was part of her, but it didn't consume her, it didn't diminish her light, in fact, the contrast of it, seemed to brighten her.

She was the opposite of him, where she was hope and laughter, he was despair and anger, the only light in him came was the reflection of her light in his eyes. The only thing they had in common was loneliness, a deep empty well of loneliness, bone deep and crushingly heavy.

"So – did you love each other?" Rey suddenly asked, and Ben felt his food turn heavy in his stomach.

"No. we didn't love each other Rey, I'm not sure all people are even capable of loving"

"Do you mean Eliza or yourself?" He leaned back at that point and crossed his arms over his chest and watched her steadily.

"You still ask a lot of questions, little scavenger" he remarked.

"And you still avoid them all" Rey said, taking a long drink from her water bottle.

"I thought you were my tutor, doesn't that mean you have to answer my questions, stoke my thirst for knowledge… teach me" she said, and looked up at him through her lashes.

"And this is what you want to know about?" he said, leaning his elbows on the table, seeing a delicate flush work its way up her slender neck.

"One of them" she said softly, and Ben knew she couldn't possibly have an idea of the effect she had, sitting there so innocently asking him to teach her about adult relationships. His own volatile body started to betray him, hardening, warming, generally making him more uncomfortable.

"Don't tell me you've never had Sex-Ed class." He said, shifting on his chair.

"I'm not talking about the mechanics. I'm taking about… the other part…" she trailed off, embarrassed but determined, her hand flapping vaguely in the air, searching for a word to describe the types of feelings she had only just started to feel, the things only just awakening inside her.

"Desire" he stated, the word clicking into place in the thick air between them. She nodded, letting out a relieved breath as she did. She really was curious, and he already knew, loner as she was, that she didn't have a group of female friends to learn about it from. He hid his hands from her under the table, suddenly sure they might be shaking.

"You need to watch more TV, or better yet, find out with someone your own age" he said, grateful
his voice was steady and casual sounding. Rey wrinkled her nose immediately.

"No way"

"What about your friend, Finn?" Ben asked, searching for a name he had heard her mention before. Rey shook her head slowly.

"Finn is great, he's my friend and he's certainly handsome, like really handsome. But the energy we have… it's not, it's not… the same" she said, her eyes suddenly, boldly meeting his. He felt like shrinking down before her sure-fire gaze, and puffing his chest out with macho pride at the same time. He settled for squirming in his chair and picking up the remains of a sandwich.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out" he muttered, ending the subject by abruptly pushing his chair back.

"I should take you home, the snow has started again" he said, ignoring the disappointed look on Rey's face as she stood and helped clear the table.
Chapter Summary

Hi there! Thanks for the comments, it is always nice to know if people are reading your efforts.

Regarding this story, as its my first time writing this couple, I'm still finding my feet with finding their voices, so thanks for your patience!

Regarding Ben - as this is a childhood friends fic if you're thinking that he is OC or not Kylo Ren enough, that is because Rey is meeting him as he was when he was a struggling teenager, in the time leading up to the complete break with his family. Ben will become Kylo Ren in this story, and there will be a time jump. So Rey will get to meet Kylo, as in the man Ben became, but she will remember the boy she knew when they were younger as well.

Just in case you're finding him too soft etc... he is how I imagine Ben Solo pre 20s to have been.

Thanks for reading!

Christmas Eve brought a lightening of the snow, and Rey watched it falling past her window in lazy, fat flakes, unhurried and unrelenting. Jack was finishing up something at the school, some pipe had burst, and she had the whole morning until Finn was stopping by, and they were going to exchange presents. She was pretty sure Finn and his friends knew how isolated she was at St Augustines and made an effort to include her in their plans, which was so nice, she didn't know how to reciprocate.

She turned onto her back, and found her mind drifting to Ben Solo again, as it always was lately. She could admit it to herself. She had a crush. A big crush. All the changes of the last year, the upheaval and pain and loneliness seemed to have honed its attention onto the taciturn boy, who was angry at the world and his parents and himself, but surprisingly kind to her.

No one really knew Ben, just like no one really knew her, least of all herself. When she had first met him, he had been lanky and awkward, with red pimpled skin and hair that should be washed more often. It was always in his face as well, his dark, expressive eyes lurking behind, watching everyone and everything, always on the outside, separated by a barrier of his own making. He was uncomfortable in his own skin, and that energy vibrated off him. She had been able to see all those things, objectively. Now though, the images of that sullen face suddenly smiling, just for her, or those full lips forming around her name had replaced those initial harsh observations. The image of Ben completing forms in Martial Arts with sinuous grace and the look on Eliza's Montgomery's face as she submitted to him were seared in her mind. They came to her when she lay awake and unable to sleep, her body yearning toward something she had no reference for.

As she lay thinking, she let her hand drift down over her chest, to the modest swelling there, and cupped her breast. She ran her thumb over the nipple, and felt as it jolted into a hard bud underneath her fingertips. She tried to imagine other hands instead of hers, large hands, with long fingers. She felt a flash of heat, and then, nothing, it faded away. Her imagination just wasn't good
enough.

"You're not making us wait until tomorrow, are you?" Finn complained as he carried 4 mugs of hot chocolate over from the kitchen nook to the sitting room.

"I for one am happy to wait" Poe announced loudly as he wiped up the carnage left behind from their drink making responsibilities. Finn handed Rose her cup, and Rey couldn't miss the smile she gave him. One that was reserved just for Finn, though he didn't seem to have noticed.

"Stop being a suck up" Finn teased. They had brought her presents as well, and Rey was a little overwhelmed to see the different shiny papers under the tree.

They passed the afternoon by the fire, telling her about Insorto Heights, about the Big Brother programme that Poe had organised to help give positive role models to younger students. Rey and Finn had made progress with the mentoring programme between the two schools, and Rey had finally realised that there were actually a couple of other students at St Augustine's who weren't completely awful, as hard as it was for her to accept.

"We usually shop the sales, we can go together if you want" Jessika was saying to Rey as she gestured for her phone.

"Take my number, I'll text you" she instructed, and Rey went to her room to find it. After rifling through her desk and bedside table, she realised she must have left it in the bag she took to Bens. She unzipped her backpack and reached her hand in. Her hand scrabbled around, meeting air. She felt a pang as she pictured the last time she'd seen the cheap, pay as you go mobile, laying on the desk in the Solo study.

"What? you can't just not have your phone for the whole of Christmas!" Finn exclaimed.

"I'd die" Rose muttered, empathetically. Rey shrugged.

"I don't know what to do, I can't exactly text him to ask if I can come get it" she said.

"Do you think he'll see it himself? Was it lying around somewhere obvious?" Rey bit her lip, thinking of the pristine state of the library, and wondered if Ben would be using it over Christmas.

"I don't know. I don't think so" she said.

"Well, this guy is your friend, right?" Finn asked suddenly.

Rey nodded slowly.

"I guess" she said.

"Well, let's go get it"
Rey decided Finn should wait in the car, as it seemed even more rude to intrude on Christmas Eve and bring a stranger along. She tucked her scarf tighter around her neck as she haltingly approached the gate and explained the situation to the lone guard there. He picked up the phone and called the main house. Rey couldn't hear the conversation, but the next thing she knew, he was waving her on.

She trudged up the snow-covered drive, arms wrapped around her middle. She was nervous, she realised. She didn't want to intrude on anything, and she felt like Ben might think she was. Then she reminded herself she was here for a reason, and not to be ridiculous. She approached the door, and jumped as she saw it was already open. She approached, hearing the murmur of raised voices, far away. She hesitated on the threshold.

"Hi? It's Rey… I'm just here for my phone" she called, stepping inside. The warmth of the house rushed through her, and she wiped her dripping boots on the mat just inside. She carefully shut the door behind her, aware of that expensive heat escaping out. She made along the hallway toward where Ben had told her the family rooms were.

"Come on Han, can't we just have a nice dinner, for Ben's sake?" A female voice cried, and Rey froze midstep.

"I don't know Leia, can we? You are the one who likes to bring up everything in front of him?" a male voice answered, rough with exasperation and frustration, the words a little slurred.

"Well, when you come home from months away, and you can't even be sober for dinner…"

"Sorry I'm not one of you refined and perfect gentleman committee friends, but you should have thought of that before you married a worthless scoundrel like me"

"If you are fishing for a protest against that – you won't get one, not tonight and not like this"

"Well, I'm glad we are done pretending to be better people for Ben's sake – because, I hate to break this to you Princess, but your son doesn't give a shit. Look at him!" The sound of crashing crockery jolted Rey out her frozen state, and, abandoning all reason, she turned and fled from the escalating shouting.

As she approached the door, she saw that a security guard had reappeared. Mortified at the prospect of being told on, eavesdropping, she darted up the nearby stair case to the bedrooms.

"Ben! Calm down" she heard the man shouting downstairs, and the soft sound a woman crying.

Her blood pounded in her ears as she slipped backwards along the hallway, terrified of being discovered. She had seen too much, overstepped, and Ben would be upset. He would push her away, and she couldn't stand it. She understood all too well how it felt for people to see the ugly
parts of you that would rather stay hidden.

Her socking feet made no sound on the polished wooden floor, and she couldn't hear anything from the room anymore. Turning, she walked along the hall, trying to desperately to orient herself. This house was ridiculously big, she decided as she started to quietly open doors and glance inside. A spare bedroom, made up like a fancy hotel, but with nothing personal around. She quietly shut the door and continued on. A bathroom, fancy golden taps gleaming in the sudden hallway light. Another spare room, and yet another bathroom.

A hard slam echoed through the hall, and she heard heavy feet moving toward her, sending her heart into her mouth. The next door she opened, she quickly ducked inside.

The smell was the first thing that alerted her to her mistake. It was masculine, undeniably so. It was spicy and salty. It was Ben. Ignoring the urge to just stand and breath lungful of the scent that had been keeping her up at night, she groped around in the darkness, pushing at the wall, until she almost fell headlong through a folding wardrobe.

She pulled herself in and shut the door quietly. Straining her ears for a hint of noise. Her hand, scrabbling to push herself into the furthest corner fell on something sharp, and she gasped as she picked up a tiny object, a metal clamp with a dangling chain. It had fallen out of a box sitting toward the back. She looked at the tiny thing, completely clueless as to what it could be even as instinct was making the hair on her arms prickle. She looked into the box it had come from. It was silent in the hall, and curiosity and her scavenger nature taking over, she tilted the box into the tiny sliver of light falling through the wardrobe door. She saw silk ropes, black and soft, but strong. She pushed them aside and found a blindfold, again, black with ribbon ties. Her breath had gone strangely still, as though there wasn't enough oxygen to breath. She picked up the blindfold and slipped it through her fingers, smelling the faintest hint of feminine perfume rise from it. She saw something hard toward the bottom of the box, and with one final push, closed her hand around the rigid pole. She pulled it awkwardly out, the long shape springing free to reveal a riding crop, with a jet handle, bound with leather straps. She stared at it. She was still staring at it when the door to Ben's room flew open.

He slammed the door hard and Rey jumped. Anger rolled off him in waves, and she felt again she was intruding. He stood in the middle of his room for a long moment, anger still sparking off his taunt shoulders, before he turned to the wall, and with an inhuman grunt, drove his fist into the plaster. Rey covered her mouth to stop herself crying out. Ben grunted, his sudden violence paused as he leaned back and looked at his hand. Suddenly, he lashed out, and she heard the meaty sound of another punch, and another after that. He was breathing hard, ugly, harsh rasps. His hitting increased in intensity and suddenly, the hardest crack she'd heard so far echoed through the room, the sound of shattering glass. Rey was sitting with her hands over her ears and tears starting to slip from her eyes at this point. He was so anger, so incredibly hurt, and it was painful to be near him. In her effort to stifle the uprising sob in her chest, she made the smallest sound in her chest.

Ben froze, his shoulders shooting up around his ears, his whole back tensing. She held her breath, willing her pounding heart to be quick as she watched him lean his forehead against the wall, his breathing finally calming.

"Rey. I know you're there" he said, his voice rough with spent emotion. She cringed on the wardrobe floor, caught red handed. He turned from the wall, and flopped onto the edge of the bed. Rey watched his chest rise and fall a couple of times, before gathering the courage to stand on shaky legs, pushing the wardrobe door open. He didn't raise his head as she approached, and sank onto the opposite corner of the bed.
"How?"

"My father said he'd let you in. I was hoping you were in the study or something" he muttered, his arm covering his face on the bed.

"Nope… sorry" she said quietly. Slowly he uncovered his face, and she could see how haunted it was. His dark eyes violent storms of unspent emotion.

"I'm sorry" she whispered again. He was quiet. She shifted uncomfortably.

"So… that's your dad" she said in a hushed voice.

"The one and only" he replied, and she couldn't make out his face.

"I should go" she said suddenly, standing. She felt a million words rise up in her throat, and million more dying there.

She jumped as she felt his hand touch her waist. She stopped in her tracks, her eyes straining to see something, anything more than the fact that he had sat up, and reached out an arm as she'd been passing. Now, his hand was on her hip, gently squeezing.

"Don't. Don't go yet" he said, so quietly, she wasn't sure she'd quite heard him.

"Ok"

She reached slowly down and touched his hand, and heard a sharp hiss of pain. Gently tugging his hand off her, she felt her way around the bed to his bedside table, and was hoping on being right in assuming there'd be a light there. After a long moment, her fingers found a cable with a switch on it. She clicked it on, her eyes blinking hard after the prolonged darkness.

He was a slumped shadow at the bottom of the bed. He was wearing a black button down, his long flopping hair held back by a tie, the first time she'd ever seen it. She couldn't see his face.

"Your phone's over there" he told her, and she saw it was indeed on his bedside table.

"Thanks"

She quickly texted Finn and told him to go, that Ben would take her home, at least she hoped he would, or she could always call Jack. Shoving the phone in her back pocket, she stood and approached him. He had kept his face angled away from the light, and now, as she reached his side, she saw the vulnerable expression he was trying to hide. His heads were red rimmed, his skin angry blotches, and smear of blood decorated his cheek.

"Oh, Ben" she whispered as her eyes dropped and she took in his hands. The knuckles were torn, badly, already puffing up, and she could see purple bruises already blooming under the patchwork tears. She reached out to touch them, and he pulled them away.

"Don't make a fuss, it's fine" he muttered, his ears reddening under her gaze. She stood and looked at him a long moment more, and then turned on her heel and walked to the other door in the room, finding an en-suite bathroom that was almost bigger than her entire cottage. She opened the cabinet door under the sink and rooted around. Just as she had suspected, this wasn't Ben Solo's first injury, and she felt sad to be proved right. She pulled out a well-stocked first aid kit, and filled a glass with warm water and picked up two tiny towels sitting on display.

"Sit back" she instructed as she laid the materials on the bed.
"Rey" he started, and she silenced him with a look.

"It wasn't a request" she said decisively, and knelt beside the bed, dampening the towels and laying them across the torn skin. He didn't make a sound as she started to gently blot the blood away.

She could feel his eyes on her as she bit her lip, wincing against the imagined pain, though the only sign that it stung from Ben was a tensing of his jaw. Once the blood was gone, she reached for antiseptic.

"This might sting" she said, raising her eyes to meet his. Again, receiving no response, she dabbed on the alcohol, and saw his intense gaze finally snap shut. She went onto to spread a healing cream on, and then started to put plasters on the cuts.

"You've don't this before… for yourself or someone else?" he asked, and she found that he was back to watching her.

"Both, I suppose. Though never self-inflected. What a perfect waste" she tutted and jumped when he suddenly gripped her wrist.

"Someone hurt you like this?" She squirmed under his gaze, her cheeks growing hotter under his laser focus.

"A long time ago" she said, playing with the ends of the plasters with her spare hand. She saw anger flash through his dark eyes at her words.

"Who?" he pressed and she let out a frustrated sigh.

"What does it matter?"

"It doesn't, so just tell me the name" he said and she saw he wasn't going to give in. Maybe he needed something else to focus on tonight.

"Fine… it's not like she can ever do it again anyway" Rey said, and was horrified to feel her lip wobble. Ben's furious gaze softened as it swept over her face.

"Your mother" he let out a hard breath at that and Rey couldn't quite meet his eyes.

"I should go… its Christmas Eve" she said lamely in the silence that had fallen.

"Is Jack waiting?"

"I wish… there's been some emergency at the school, he might not even make it home. That place is falling apart" she grumbled. She felt Ben's hand tighten on her wrist.

"Then… why not stay… a little while longer" he said quietly, and Rey felt her heart clench as her stomach dropped. She turned to look around the room, trying to find a way to hide the elation his words caused in her. She stood up and walked to a broken frame. She picked it up carefully, seeing a picture under the spider webbed cracks.

"Is this your mum and dad?" she asked as she carefully pulled the picture out. He glanced over and nodded.

"Wow, your mum is really beautiful" she breathed, tracing the imagine of a beautiful, kind looking woman. She looked at the man, who had a roguish charm, and thought how mismatched they seemed, though you couldn't deny their attractiveness. Ben stood in the middle, much younger,
perhaps 5 years old. He was smiling so wide she could see all his teeth, his generous mouth stretched wide.

"You were a cute kid" she teased, laying the photo down on a unit, before moving on to see what else adorned the room. An overstuffed pin board was next, and she carefully looked through the memos and physics equations and formulae tacked up. She spied the corner of what looked like a vivid illustration and pulled it forward. It was a picture, in charcoal. She found her eyes following the artists finger strokes around, as it pulled her in. It was dark, overwhelmingly so, and she felt a little suffocated just looking at it. It was really quite masterful, but so angry and then, she knew.

"You drew this... you're an artist" she said, looking back at Ben, to find he had moved behind her, his eyes fixed on the same picture. He pulled a face.

"Hardly"

"No. You are." She insisted. She had seen a lot of art, admittedly not always in person, but she had loved to look at masterful work. Work that stirred emotion by the blending of talent and soul. Ben's art had that and more. It was a physically affecting thing, to look at the picture. It made her feel alone and frustrated, searching and never finding.

"It's beautiful, and sad" she said as she let the corner slip back under the study notes.

"Why sad?"

"That's the artists secret. What's it called?" she suddenly asked, wondering if he named his favourite pieces, as she did.

"Homecoming" he said, after a pause. She could feel him standing just out of reach behind her, so much taller than her already, she could feel his eyes pointed somewhere around the top of her head. She took another step forward and felt him echo it. Swallowing hard, she turned toward the bed, and before she could lose her nerve, crawled onto it, and then back to sit against the headboard. Ben was standing by the edge, watching her curiously. She crossed her legs and leaned back comfortably. He studied her a second longer, and then walked to the other side, bending his long legs onto the other side, his hands almost immobile with the amount of plasters she had put on. He leaned back next to her, just close enough for their shoulders to skim each others.

"My favourite class is Art" she said.

"I know" he said, and she glanced at him quickly in question.

"Jack said" he explained.

"You'll have to show me some" he said, even as Rey shook her head vigorously.

"No way"

"But you've seen mine, fair's fair Rey" he chuckled.

"The difference is yours is actually good" she said, pushing herself down so her head was against his pillow. She could feel his surprise and caution, practically radiating off him. She turned on her side and looked at him. He carefully pushed himself down to mirror her. They lay side by side, close enough to touch, but only just, and watched each other.

She looked at his face, and realised how much knowing him more had changed her opinion of his looks. His cheekbones were high and his jaw was strong, his nose long, all in all, it was an
interesting and sculpted face. His eyes were large and expressive, topped by winged brows. It was curious collection of parts that didn't quite fit, but in the most attractive way. And then, when a rare smile creased his forehead, it tipped him over into flat out handsome.

"What are you doing?" he murmured, looking at her face with equal intensity. Two artists cataloguing the features of the other, finding beauty in the lines and hollows of their youthful countenances.

"Ben, can I ask you something?" she said, ignoring his question. His eyes narrowed.

"It's not more about... Eliza, is it? I don't think I can take those type of questions right now" he said honestly, sure in that moment, that Rey's innocence questions and burning curiosity, as she lay on his bed, looking altogether too beautiful, would be too much for him to handle. And she was beautiful, alarmingly so, he realised as he watched her hazel eyes roam his face. She was growing into herself, her body and face every day and it was fascinating to watch. She inhabited herself more fully than anyone he'd ever met. Completely comfortable in her skin, so unlike himself. He had always known she was cute, but now, she seemed like a girl on the cusp of womanhood, and he had a sudden insight into the striking woman she'd become very soon. Add that to her wit and compassion, and she was so far out of his league, he could barely fathom it.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked, and he couldn't help letting out a laugh at the unexpected question.

"You have to answer the first thing that comes to you!" she urged as he started to think.

"I don't know... I really don't. In control – I suppose." He bit out, answering the first thing that came to him. Rey narrowed her eyes at him.

"That's not a job" she said and he smiled again.

"You didn't say it had to be a job" he reminded her.

"What about you, Rey? What do you want to be when you grow up? First thing that comes to you" he fired back.

"Safe!" she cried out, grinning under the pressure of an answer. Now that she had managed one, the word hung over them.

"Safe?"

"Yes, safe." He shot her look and she huffed indignantly.

"What? Yours is worse... safe means a lot of things"

"Like what?"

"Like not hungry, not cold, not... afraid that your life could just change one day because of a horrible landlord or mean boss. Safe means that the people you love wont just disappear overnight. All those things mean safe to me. I don't care what job I do or where I live, if I can feel safe" she said, looking up at a spot over his head.

"What does control mean to you?" she asked, and as she did, he felt her words fit into some lock inside of him.

"I suppose it means the same, kind of." He realised aloud. Rey turned on her stomach and looked
down at him, and he studiously avoided looking where her t-shirt had ridden up, a sender band of skin exposed on her lower back.

"I don't think you're in danger of getting kicked out of your house" she teased.

"Yeah, I guess. But there are other ways to feel unsafe" he murmured. She was looking down at him, and he had to remind himself too many times to pull his eyes away from her smiling lips. They locked eyes for far too long, and Rey held her breath. A tendril of emotion uncurling from her heart and reaching for enigmatic boy before her. So full of rage and loneliness, so like herself and so different at the same time.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, breaking the spell. She pulled it out and looked at the display.

"Jack's home. I better go" she said, pushing herself up to sitting, almost feeling like a bucket of ice water had descended on her, so abrupt was the shift from that intimate place that they had created. Ben sat up too, ignoring the crushing disappointment at her leaving.

"I'll drive you"
The new school year started and Rey slipped back into the routine of St Augustines. She hung out at Finn's at the weekend, or they went for a pizza and a movie on his side of town. She went shopping in the sales with Jessika and Rose, and was glad to finally have the opportunity to boast two female friends.

"That looks great on you" Rose blurted as Rey stood in front of the mirror looking critically at the cream coloured wrap top with cold shoulder sleeves and snugly, crossed fabric at the bust. It was fancier than anything she currently owned, but she did like it. She looked at Rose.

"Really?"

"Yes really, I don't know why I'm telling you, you hardly need any help looking prettier, but it really suits you" Rose said with a soft smile and flushed after. Rey turned fully to her.

"I've never really thought about looking pretty. I mean, I know all girls do, to a certain extent, but it's always been kind of a luxury. Like, there has always been so many more things to worry about before that. Then, even when I came to Jacks, and I didn't have to worry anymore, it just seemed like maybe I was missing the pretty gene" Rey mused, pulling the long sleeves over her hands.

"Is that weird?" she asked.

"You're mad if you think you don't have the pretty gene, but if you mean you're missing the vain, stupid self-conscious gene that girls get, then I'm jealous" Jessika called from inside a dressing room.

"Yeah Rey, you have to know that you're beautiful. Hasn't anyone ever told you?" Rose asked, her cheeks warming at the question. Rey thought about Ben and his eyes roving her face.

"What she means is has Finn ever told you. And she is trying not to make it sound like if you say yes, she'll die" Jessika called, and Rose shot to her feet, her face turning beet red.

"That is not what I was asking and I don't – I don't even want to know that, it's not my business anyway" she protested hotly. Rey touched her arm to bring her out of her fit of embarrassment.

"I thought we were friends? Friends share stuff, right? Like their feelings… and to answer the question, no, Finn has never said anything remotely like that, and he won't"

"How do you know?"
"Because, we're really are just friends, he's my first actually – friend, and he knows it" Rey said, gripping Rose's hand a moment to try and reassure her. Rose nodded, looking relieved, though still mortified.

"Have you ever told him how you feel?"

"Sure, we talk about it all the time" Rose replied

"Really?"

"Of course not really! Who just talks to a guy like that, about relationship stuff?" Rose complained, dropped her beating face into her hands. Rey thought about Ben and her rather direct questioning.

"What have you got to lose?"

"Erm… I could lose my friend. He's one of the most popular guys in school, he plays football. He's not short of female attention" Rose said miserably. Rey thought it out a moment.

"But he's not with anyone else. As far as I've seen, you're one of the only girls around who don't fawn over him. Maybe he's just waiting for you" Rey said, and prayed she wasn't misleading Rose.

But she thought of the glances she'd seen from Finn, when Rose wasn't looking, or the way he always put her first. First in line for things, first to dole out snacks to, first to carry her heavy book bag, and she hoped she had not stirred hope where no existed.

Winter turned into Spring, and gradually Rey fully relaxed into her new life. School was better, though she still had to suffer through seeing Hux in the hallway occasionally, he had tuned down his antagonism. His father, an influential congressman had been at the centre of a scandal, when his offshore accounts had been hacked and leaked over winter break. Turned out that Armitage Hux's illustrious father was paying quite the sum to various mistresses, so much in fact it was surprising the family could still boast of wealth. When it came out how much of his "necessary expenditures" were billed as job related expenses, he was out of office quickly. Rey took pleasure in it, though she knew it was mean spirited, but seeing Hux taken down a peg was so satisfying.

"Concentrate Rey" Ben snapped, as she fell backwards onto the mat again. They were sparring after school in the gym, with Rey desperate to practice her self-defence moves.

"Up you get, scavenger, better be quicker on your feet than that" Ben was saying, holding out a hand to her.

She scowled at him, before jumping up herself and shaking her arms which were smarting from his throw. He wasn't in a good mood. She'd had to cajole him into practising with her, and then, when she'd come out the changing room, his face had turned sour and he'd been nothing but an ass to her. Knocking her down, pre-empting every manoeuvre, she couldn't get a hit in. She gritted her teeth at
the arrogant angle to his head as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"Why am I scared to know what you're thinking?" he muttered, stepping back into a fighting stance. Rey settled before him and waited for him to attack her.

"Because, despite all evidence, you aren't completely dumb" she muttered, and gasped as her block was knocked away, and she felt Ben's hands close around her bare neck. He started to walk her backwards into the wall, towering over her, gently pushing her by the neck.

"How are you gonna get out of this, I'm giving you plenty of time to do so" he said, and Rey saw red. She stopped struggling away from him and suddenly stepped in closer, making his hands slacken in the process. Once she was up close, she stomped on his instep, and when his hands let go of her neck, grabbed his shoulders and touched her knee into his balls, in a light imitation of her intended movement.

"Bang, you're dead" she said as he stepped back out her reach.

"You can't knee everyone in the balls, believe it or not, they might start to expect it and counter" Ben said dismissively.

"Please, if I had gone all in, you wouldn't be able to have children, never mind counter" Rey snapped as she went to her water bottle against the wall and gulped down some much needed liquid.

Ben watched her, irritation mingling with frustration as it always seemed to these days. She couldn't know the effect she had on him, at least, he didn't think she had a clue. She was free of artifice, just one of the things that was sexy as hell about Rey. So, when she'd stepped out the changing room, dressing in light black leggings and a skin tight sleeveless vest, her hair bound up in her usual three buns and proceeded to bend over stretching in front of him, before bouncing up and down teasing him to fight her, she couldn't possible know the urge he'd had to tamp down to wrestle her onto the mat and kiss her senseless.

And now, her body twisting against his, her soft breath sometimes tickling his ear as they sparred, her fierce concentration and furrowed brow, as she looked for more strength in herself, it was almost too much to hide how much it turned him on.

In the changing room after, Rey pushed her things in her bag, already anticipating the bruise she'd have on her leg from a last move. Though admittedly, it was a bruise of her own making, in thinking that she could trip up the steel that seemed to reinforce Ben's long legs. It helped her a lot to spar with Ben. The teacher hand paired girls with boys in the class, to the boys' dismay. However, Rey knew why. For women to practice self-defence properly, they had to be up against a realistic target, and for the majority of women, that was a man.

"You're Rey, Old Jack's daughter, right?" a throaty female voice asked, as Rey closed her locker and looked around.

Eliza Montgomery, in all her bombshell state. The girl was only getting better with age, Rey could admit and she watched as the blonde tucked her shining golden hair behind a tiny ear. She nodded a response.

"I saw you practicing… with Ben. Ben Solo" Eliza said, as though Rey might not know who'd just beat her into the mat for 30 minutes.

"So what?" Rey asked, the usual challenge in her voice. A habit she'd yet to break.
"Nothing.. I just. This is stupid. I shouldn't have said anything" the older girl said, and Rey was intrigued by the self-conscious look she saw on her usually confident face.

"It's fine. Go ahead." Eliza deliberated a moment more, before stepping closer, her voice lowering a little, her eyes darting to the side to check for eavesdroppers.

"I just wanted to warn you, you know girl to girl… be careful with him. Ben I mean. He's not what he seems" she said. Rey kept her face implacable.

"You mean he's not a hot tempered, angry, depressed emo loner?" she said, arching an eyebrow at Eliza. Eliza blanched under Rey's unapologetic take.

"I mean, I know how he can be. He can be really sweet sometimes, unexpected. But, he's all kinds of fucked up, and if you're not careful he'll fuck you up to" Eliza said, and Rey saw a desperation flash in the other girl's eyes.

"Ben and I are friends. Just friends, but he is a friend, so I don't really want to hear you talk like that about him" Rey said, hearing the defensiveness in her voice.

"What I saw out there is hardly just friends."

"Then you saw wrong, because that's all we are" Rey said, even as her heart picked up at the thought that they looked more. Eliza was shaking her head.

"It might start out that way, but believe me. He'll get inside your head and then before you know it, he'll have you gagged and bound" Eliza muttered, and Rey froze at the words, that long lost curiosity roaring back to life. She swallowed hard, as she forced her voice to sound casual.

"That's a little colourful isn't it? I mean, I get it, you don't like him, no need to be theatrical"

"It's not theatrical. Ben Solo likes to tie girls up and control them, dominate them, tease them, deny them --" Eliza broke off with a shiver, and Rey wondered if it was a fear or nostalgia, as she looked at Eliza's dreamy expression.

"I don't know what you're talking about" she said honestly, feeling a prickling tingle sweep throughout her body. Eliza watched her a long moment, her eyes assessing.

"Don't you?" she asked quietly, before continuing.

"Maybe it's already too late for you, I don't know. I just wanted to warn you, so you know what you're letting yourself in for" she said as she went to leave.

"Did he ever hurt you?" Rey called suddenly, the question unknown before it burst out her lips. Eliza paused by the door, wringing her book bag in her hand.

"Not more than I asked him to" Eliza admitted then, and left.

Left Rey alone with the confirmation of her suspicions about Ben, her gaping lack of knowledge and experience and one new certainty. That Ben Solo could hurt a girl like Eliza, if she'd allowed him to.

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That night, with the blue glow of her laptop illuminating her face, Rey searched for more information about the things Eliza had told her. She quickly found herself drawn into a world of new terms, rules and followers, one that she had never known existed. She read the terminology, started to understand, maybe a little about how Ben and Eliza's relationship had worked. What she found thrilled and terrified her at the same time. For a girl who had never really been kissed, the graphic descriptions of some kinds of relationships were mind blowing. At the same time, she felt better knowing there were many other people out there that were like Ben, and that there was nothing wrong with his tastes.

She imagined, from what Eliza had said about him and her own experience with Ben's desire to control, that he was dominant. She tried to imagine him, participating in a dominant scene, blindfolding a girl tied to a bench, naked and vulnerable, as he remained fully dressed in black. In her imagination, the girl looked less like Eliza and more like herself. The yearning she had been feeling since becoming closer to Ben raged through her stronger than ever. She wanted to know, wanted to experience that rite of passage. The desire and curiosity were burning her from the inside out.

And she wanted Ben to do it. She wanted her memories of the momentous occasion to include him, she realised, closing her laptop and lying down. She knew in the back of her mind that he was going to be leaving in a few short months, bound for one of the prestigious Universities he had been accepted to. She knew that once there, he would likely forget her, the little high school friend with a crush. She wanted him, she wanted him so very badly, she realised, and time was running out.

In March Rey faced her first important math exam of the year. She waited anxiously for the results, suddenly caring more about this result than any other. To do well would mean Ben would be proud of her, but the end of an immediate need for tutoring. To do badly would mean more tutoring required, which meant more visits to Ben room, but carried the risk of Ben starting to think she was dense. More afternoons curled up on his bed, books strewn over the covers, as he did his homework and she hers, with him holding out his hand sagely when it was time for him to check for her. She loved the studious look he got when he was tutoring her. Sometimes, while he was marking, she'd wander around and look at things. New ticket stubs from a Muse concert he'd taken her to, or books that he was reading, sometimes more drawings. They were pretty much as depressing as the first one she'd found. She was glad to have taken a picture when her phone of the print of Ben and his parents when he was young, as it seemed to have disappeared after he's destroyed the frame.

She watched a sub teacher approach with her exam, and set it on the table.

"Well done, keep it up, err… Rey" he said, reading the name on the top of the test and she saw a
red A- on the top corner. She grinned widely, and snatched out her phone, taking a quick illicit picture of the paper, before sending it to Ben.

"You've improved" a voice remarked, and Rey looked up to see Katherine Phasma, a senior who was helping the substitute teacher, looking over her shoulder.

"I marked the previous lot" Katherine explained in response to Rey's curious look. Katherine was the daughter of one of the history professors at the school and her mother was a professor at Yale and while, much wealthier than Jack and Rey, she wasn't in the same league as the other students of St Augustines.

She had been the first to sign up for the mentor programme at Insorto Heights, and was hell bent on working in education, following after her mother illustrious footsteps. She was brusque and business like, but over time, Rey had come to appreciate that she had her own code of honour, not unlike Rey's own, though, she didn't think Katherine would approve if she knew about Rey's little rainy day fund. It was neglected nowadays, as Rey hadn't added to it in a while. She could recognise her need to steal and her need to have options as security measures. Now that she was more settled, she didn't need to worry where her next meal would come from and she had stopped hoarding her little treasures.

"Thanks, I have been working on it, so it's good to know it's not been a waste" she said though she couldn't keep the smile off her face.

"If you keep the grades up like you are, then you could apply to whatever school you wanted to" Katherine said, and Rey felt her good mood plummet. She turned back to the paper, crinkling the end.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind" she said, and she could feel Katherine lingering at her side. Far too intuitively.

"You already know there's scholarships and suchlike available Rey, no need to rule it out" Katherine said almost sternly.

"Don't you need to get back to it?" Rey asked pointedly, knowing the direct girl wouldn't be offended. She watched Katherine finish going around class, picking up stray papers. College was something Rey was not really letting herself think of. She had never even considered going to college, it had never crossed her mind, until Ben had brought it up.

"Which would you prefer? Connecticut or New York?"

"For what?"

"University" Rey had screwed her nose up.

"The weather sucks in both locations, so pass"

"You can't pass, choose one."

"I choose Florida – Miami… that sounds nice and toasty" Rey had said, and jumped as Ben had whacked her suddenly on the ass. She was lying face down on his bed, her books propped comfortably in front of her face, while he had sat in his usual position by the headboard. The stinging smack had sent her upright in indignation.

"What the hell?"
"Come on Rey, you can't go to college there"

"Why not?" she asked, resisting the urge to rub her smarting skin. He'd rolled his eyes at her.

"Because there's no way a Solo will be allowed to go to a party school. So, chose New York or Connecticut, take your time." He had said, shifting back to stare at his heavy computing text book. Her mouth had hung open for almost a full minute before she had lain back down.

"I'm waiting" Ben had cajoled, and she had pushed down her plummeting emotions.

"Connecticut" She'd whispered quietly.

"Connecticut it is" he'd replied, with a smile in his voice. She hadn't said then that in that moment she'd realised that she very probably wouldn't be going to college, and certainly not an Ivy league one.

It was the first time she'd really thought about how their lives were soon to diverge dramatically. She didn't argue about it with him, what was the point. He was only teasing and she didn't want to hear half-hearted assurances that she could get a scholarship or something equally lame, even if she could have gotten in.

Ben had promised her a surprise if she aced her Maths exam, and when she heard her phone beep during the next period, she pulled her mind from the melancholy thoughts about graduation and sneaked a look, she couldn't help the grin that spread over her face.

"Knew you could do it, kid. Friday after school, be ready for your reward"
"Well, thank you for the longest week of my life" Rey huffed as she stepped up into the passenger side of Bens Range Rover.

"I'm getting the blame?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her as he pulled out the school gates and merged into traffic.

"Of course you are." She said as she fiddled with the radio before turning to him

"So… tell me, where are we going?" she asked excitedly. Ben stole a glanced at her excited face, her cheeks smooth and freckled, her hazel eyes dancing with excitement.

"Well, what's the point in ruining the surprise after the longest week of your life, might as well wait a little longer" he pointed out. Rey slumped back, recognising all the signs of Ben digging in, and decided to drop it.

"Fine, don't tell me, I'm sure I'll be able to guess before long" she said, looking out the window and looking for clues. A little while later, she turned to him.

"We are going into New York" she said carefully, and he caught that hesitation on her face. He nodded.

"Yes, we are, and I know what you're thinking, but I thought, it's time to make some good memories there. It's a great city, don't let it become a graveyard" he instructed with his usual heavy handed tact. Rey bit her lip and sat back. She watched the city grow around them. She hadn't been back since Jack had come and pick her up from child protective services in Queens. The skyline stretched out, so familiarly and she couldn't seem to rip her eyes from it. She felt a warm hand cover hers, and jerked to see Ben's huge hand dwarfing hers. It was soft and warm, and his thumb rubbed a circle on her knuckle.

"Just breath Rey. Breath" he instructed, and so she did, because it was hard to concentrate on anything else when he was touching her. They didn't go anywhere near Queens, and in fact, Rey saw little that she recognised. They drove directly to the upper West side, and pulled into an underground parking there. She looked around at the expensive cars gathered in the gloomy garage. Ben opened her door and she stepped down, the smell of gas and fumes hanging in the air.

"Let's go" he said, and she saw him pick up a couple of bags at his feet. Recognising familiar straps, she stopped, looking at him in askance, her heart suddenly beating in her throat.

"That's my bag" she said.
"Jack packed it, I have no idea what's in it, but hopefully its fine for tomorrow" he said.

"Tomorrow?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him. He grinned

"Yes tomorrow, come on, let's get moving" he said, ushering her toward the lift. They ascended in silence as Rey tried to wrap her head around the fact that this was apparently an overnight trip. Overnight with Ben Solo. Overnight with Ben Solo, alone. To calm her run away thoughts, she focused on the flashing lights climbing higher and higher. They stopped at the top floor. There was a strange kind of hush over the opulent surroundings, as they walked from the lift. There were only 2 doors on the penthouse floor, and Ben walked directly to one and typed a code in.

"It's 1931, in case you need it" he said, pushing the door open and holding it for her. She walked in slowly, her eyes taking everything in, her mouth robbed of glib words.

Floor to ceiling windows dominated most of the space before her, with the setting sun over the city sending pink and blue light streaming into the sleep, modern space.

"Is this –" she trailed off, feeling overwhelmed.

"My place in the city, for when I visit my mother" he finished for her.

"Does your mom live here too?" she asked, immediately looking for signs of a female presence.

"No. Just me. She lives pretty close." Rey looked around the huge space.

"All this, and you use it on weekends, sometimes?" she asked, and she saw a look of guilt flash quickly across Ben's features.

"Well, I might live and work here one day, so it's an investment I guess" he explained, looking awkward as he did.

"And if you move to… I don't know… Boston?" she asked, her voice a squeak.

"Sell it, keep it. I don't know. You could always rent it from me, if you end up living in the city, and I don't… I bet you'd be a great tenant"

"I don't exactly think it'd be in my price range" she murmured, walking over to the window and staring at the sunset.

"I'd make it in your price range. Anyway, it might be kind of nice… knowing where you are and what you're up, even when I'm not around." He joked, and the words took Rey back to Eliza and her whispered confessions in the locker room, about domination and control.

"That sounds a little creepy and controlling" she said, feeling him walk up to the window beside her before she saw him.

"Maybe I am a little creepy and controlling" he said, his low voice matching her quiet pitch, creating an intimacy in the moment.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you wanted me caged up in your pretty apartment, with you holding the key" she said, and caught his gaze that was resting on her. She saw him swallow hard, his eyes liquid darkness.

"Can I take your coat?" he asked, holding out a hand.

The moment passed, as they usually did, but Rey noticed, he didn't deny it.
A couple of hours later, during which Rey broke Ben's winning streak on his PS4, and further explored his cavernous apartment, he had finally told her to get ready. She had put on her cream top, the one from the sales and the nicest one she had. Hiding under her coat, she had followed Ben out onto the city street, and instantly felt that sweep of magic that New York had. The bustle and energy, the feeling that no matter the time, the city was alive.

Ben had hailed a cab and given an address with confidence. Rey sat back and watched him. She could see him in this city, it already seemed like his to her. She was painfully aware that she was looking at Ben now through the glasses of her monstrous crush, but that evening in the city, awakened in Rey another kind of yearning. The yearning to live in a city like this with a partner at her side. Someone strong and capable, confident and adult, navigating their way through the crowds. For a fiercely independent person, it was unsettling.

He took her to a Japanese restaurant for dinner, in a pokey hole in the East Village. It was complete with chefs slicing and dicing for an audience, a candy floss machine for deserts, and a menu written entirely in characters, which Ben was learning to progress his martial arts studies. Rey fumbled with her chopsticks and laughed at his pronunciation. They swung on their swinging chairs, and played Jenga once they'd finished. Afterwards, they walked along Avenue A, deeper into the heart of the village, and Ben pulled her to a stop in front of a derelict looking building. Of course, being Alphabet city, most of the building looked fairly disreputable, and Rey froze as she realised it was actually a concert venue.

"Are you taking me to see Florence?" she asked, nearly breathless as her eyes lighted on a certain poster.

"I am taking you to see Florence' he confirmed, a small smile on his full lips. She couldn't help it, she acted impulsively and reached her arms around his neck, pressing her mouth hard against his cheek, crushing her body against his.

"I take it you're happy" he said, sounding strained after long moment, and she pulled back, grinning madly.

"Let's go! I'm going to buy you a t-shirt, and you have to wear it" she'd said, grabbing his hand.

Hours later, Rey's whole body was buzzing with the music, her feet were throbbing from jumping and dancing, her voice rubbed raw. She was shiny with sweat, her hair sticking to her forehead and the nape of her neck on long tendrils. Ben was at her elbow, and even he was dancing, well, kind of, especially if she took his hands. Then he spun them around, sometimes lifting her as she tried to see. She felt completely happy, a strange and slightly scary feeling. The song came to a triumphant finish, and Ben handed her a bottle of water. She drank some to ease her parched throat, and then
rested her head against Ben's chest, the very top of it only reaching his breast bone. She was exhausted, and she could feel her cheek sink into the wetness of Ben's chest, and his heart was racing as well.

Another song started, slower, and acoustic version.

You are the hole in my head  
You are the space in my bed  
You are the silence in between  
What I thought and what I said

"I love this song" she smiled to Ben, and he gave her the lopsided smile that always stopped her heart.

"You love all the songs"

"I especially love this one" she insisted.

You are the night-time fear  
You are the morning when it's clear  
When it's over you'll start  
You're my head, you're my heart

"Dance with me then Rey, dance with me to this song you love" he said, bending down to speak into her ear, his hot breath sending goose bumps leaping from the point of contact.

"We have been dancing" she said, feeling his strong arms curve around her, pulling her more firmly against him.

"I mean, dance with me" he said lowly, his eyes burning into hers. She hesitantly raised her arms, and let them rest on his shoulders, and giggled, as it was so damn high, it was uncomfortable. He took her hands, and placed them instead on his chest, splayed open against his body, before returning his own to her hips, and pulled her close, resting his chin lightly on the top of her head.

Through the crowd, I was crying out  
And in your place there were a thousand other faces  
I was disappearing in plain sight  
Heaven help me, I need to make it right

They swayed back and forth in the crowd, the melody winding its way around them, and the singer's voice filling Rey's heart. The words haunted Rey, so close to all the things she wished she could say to Ben. She raised her eyes to his, and surprised to find they were trained on her. Full of unspoken things.

Before she could lose her nerve and become afraid, she raised herself onto her tiptoes and tugged his head closer. Closing her eyes, terrified of feeling him pull away, she pressed her mouth to his.

As far as kisses go, it was chaste at first.

She pressed her lips to his, and tried to commune her feelings through that connected place. Ben's arms stiffened around her, she had shocked him, before she felt his lips soften a little under hers. She had no idea what to do, what never been kissed before, and was apparently taking matters into her own hands.

She felt Ben's hands slide up her and come to cup her face. He gently took the mantle of the kiss
from her, changing the angle of his head, deepening their connection, and she jumped as she felt his warm, wet tongue slide sweetly across her sealed lips. A careful swipe for entry, a question, a request for permission. She let her lips part a little, and almost moaned at the new sensation of his tongue gently caressing hers for a second. It turned her blood to fire, and she was afraid if she opened her eyes, she would actually be aflame in his arms. She was aware of everything, the crowd, the lights and the dying strains of the song, and him. She was so aware of him, his breath in his chest, the heart beat pounding against her hand, the feel of his belt buckle cutting into her sternum, how large and warm his hands were, as he pushed one into her hair, coming to rest at the nape of her neck.

The audience were screaming applause on either side, and in a daze, Rey realised the song had finished, and they weren't in fact clapping because Rey, the never kissed virgin, had finally made her move. The crowd jostled them and they broke apart. She immediately felt awkwardness rush to fill the space between them and turned to look at the stage, where Florence and the Machine were saying goodnight. Her mind was going a million miles an hour and she thought she was probably freaking out a little, and then, just when she was thinking of bolting into the ladies' toilets and climbing out the window, Ben wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and pressed a kiss into her hair, and everything was ok again.

They took the subway back, because he had never been on it and she didn't want the night to end. As the train roared uptown, they sat side by side on the hard plastic seats, and she watched the different types of people come and go. She saw a girl with her mother, the mother closing her eyes immediately to sleep, and the girl tucking her arms around her mother's handbag, eyeing the crowd warily and Rey wondered if she'd ever looked like that.

They got back to Ben's apartment, and the awkwardness crept back as they discussed sleeping arrangements.

"There's a spare room, so no need to be uncomfortable" Ben was saying as he showed her the bedroom and bathroom along the hall from his. Rey lingered at his side, afraid to say that she wanted to be closer to him, afraid to say she wanted to kiss him again, afraid of a lot of things. Instead, she went into the room dutifully, staying by the door as he leant against the jam and smiled at her.

"Did you enjoy your reward?" he asked, and she was struck by how much she'd seen him smile in the last 6 hours, compared to the occasional one she managed to elicit at home.

"Yes… it's been great. Are we going straight home tomorrow?" she asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Why? Not had enough excitement?" he said, and his raised eyebrow did something strange to her insides.

"You'll just have to see kid, I might have another trick up my sleeve" he said, pausing to pull out his phone. He frowned at the display.

"Do you have to take it?" she asked, aware that Ben's old timey manners usually prevented him from answering his phone when he was with her. He shook his head, clicking it off and putting it back in his pocket. He lingered on, his eyes on her, and she was taken in again how playful they looked.

"I could see you here, you know… this evening, you looked at home"

"Well, I did live in this city most my life" Rey reminded him.
"True, but I could see it again, differently, better… maybe NYU" he said suddenly, jamming his hands in his pockets as he kicked his foot aimlessly.

"NYU for what?"

"You. Art at NYU. I could see it" he said. She stared at him, trying and failing to come up with words.

"And you? Connecticut?" she asked, reminding them of their long ago conversation. He focused on picking at the wall, refusing to meet her eyes.

"No… I was thinking, Columbia." He said.

'Think about it. Sleep well" he said, and was disappearing out the door before she could blink. She sat staring at the closed door, her brain reeling.

After a few minutes, she gave up trying to figure out his cryptic clues and got ready for bed. Jack had done a decent job, so much so she wondered if he hadn't had help. She washed her face and brushed her teeth, let her hair down to curl around her are shoulders. She had an oversized t-shirt and baggy leggings to sleep in, and Rey bit down a laugh at the oddly paternal instinct of Jack's to allow her to sleep at a boy's house unsupervised, but only if she dressed as unattractively as possible. She knew she'd be too hot in them, and so instead settled for her previous black tank that she worn to school and her underwear, which were shorts anyway. She got into the stark white bed, the cover so cold and crisp she thought it might have been the very first time someone had slept on it, and turned out the light.

In the absence of distractions, her mind flew straight to Ben. What was he playing at? They weren't a couple, he'd made it more than clear that he considered her too young for a relationship being under 17. He treated her like no one else ever had, and respected her so damn much, he was putting himself unfairly into entirely too good a light. He was messing with her head and heart in a way that was starting to hurt. Why was he talking about a future with her, when he seemed unwilling to even kiss her, unless she initiated it? And the deeper and darker question, how he could promise her a future, unless he was promising to stick around.

She tossed and turned with it, the thoughts wrestling in her head, and at some point in that long dark, but noisy city night, she heard a door along the corridor squeak open softly, and seized her chance without a second thought. She tore out her room, bare feet soundless on the floor, and saw Ben's bare back in front of the sink.

"Ben" she called softly, and saw him start. He turned slowly, putting down his glass of water on the counter, and she was confronted with his bare chest, which was doing nothing to help her keep a cool head.

"What's wrong? Are you ok?" he asked, concerned. She couldn't seem to tear her eyes from his torso, so much more muscled than she had expected. He was still thin, tall and lanky with clothes on, but under, there were actual muscles, a lot of them and she could see them all.

"No, I'm not" she said honestly, crossing her arms around her middle, she raised her eyes to his face, ignoring his adorably mussed bedhead.

"What's going on with us?" she asked directly.

"I could ask you the same question" he said back, leaning an arm on the counter and she tried to ignore the effects of those muscles on her own.
"Why are you acting like you care if we are both in the same place for college, despite the fact that I am not even going to college" she said, suddenly wishing she wasn't standing under his intense scrutiny in just panty shorts.

"First of all, you are going to college, secondly, why are you acting like you don't care? Do you really not care if we walk away from each other in 2 months, and never see each again?" he asked, coming around the side of the island, and she braced herself at the sight of his tall body, clad only in black pyjama bottoms, which were hanging way too low on his hips for any sort of peace of mind. As he came closer she found her eyes struck to the dusting trail of dark hair he had, from his belly button downwards. She had suddenly never felt younger. Ben had a man's body. Ben was a man.

"Of course, I care" she forced out, trying to turn her mind back to the conversation.

"Why did you kiss me tonight?" he asked, mirroring her earlier abruptness. Her cheeks flushed as she avoided his eyes. His hand suddenly snapped out and nimble fingers caught her chin in a strong grip.

"Don't avoid me, Rey. Look at me" he ordered, and Rey felt her mouth go dry at the commanding tone. Ben the dominant. He raised her chin, though she still evaded his probing gaze.

"Look at me" he said lowly, and she found her eyes pulled magnetically to his. His lips quirked in the ghost of a smile.

"Good. Now, tell me, why did you kiss me if you don't see our future together"

"Curiosity?" she tried, suddenly sure she could never reveal her heart so brazenly.

"Try again" he said authoritatively. "You can't lie to me, Rey. I know you"

"It was my first kiss. I wanted it to be with you" she swallowed the words that revealed she wanted much more than that and looked at him defiantly. He studied her in silence, before stepping closer.

"How do you do that?" he whispered, his eyes roaming over her face, searching for a hint or clue to some unsolvable mystery.

"Do what?"

"Make me powerless, bring me to my knees with a look, bind me, blind me and gag me with your smile"

"I don't do any of those things"

"Not on purpose, which is what makes it all more terrifying. You have no idea of your power. It shines" his throaty whisper worked its way to her, and felt her need to touch him resurge.

Slowly she raised her hands to touch his fingers, still on her face. She then pushed her fingers up his arms, feeling the skin and muscle beneath as she went. He had gone still, incredibly so, with a repressed energy, like a storm gathering force before tearing outwards. She stepped closer, and he took a breath that wasn't entirely steady.

"How was your first kiss then?" he breathed, raising one finger to gently trace her lips. She leaned her head further into his touch, and pressed a kiss against his roughened fingertips.

"Unmatchable" she said, raising her eyes to his, her challenge bold and fearless, just like her.
"We'll see about that" he murmured, as his dark head bent to hers.

She'd always wonder later, what would have happened if the next few seconds had been different. There are points in your life that forever alter its course. Forks in the path you don't see coming, and once you have happened upon them, you can never find your way back to that original track.

For Rey, it was the sunlight falling through the mossy green canopy of the forest by Jacks cottage as she stared out the truck window at her new home. It was Finn's inquisitive brown eyes and flashing smile when he'd spoken to her outside the principal's office. It was the rough pattern of the chairs in child protective services in Queens, blue and grey check. It was the sound of complete silence from her mother's room and the pervasive feeling of wrongness.

Life turns on a dime.

And in that moment, where she was so close to Ben Solo that she couldn't imagine it might be the very last time she saw him. If someone had told her, that they would never stand together again, just Ben and Rey, planning a life together, she wouldn't have believed them.

And yet, it would have been true. That's the thing about those moments, you don't see them coming, and often you don't appreciate when they've passed. The ripples of consequences slowly spread over your life, and only later you can look back and pinpoint it… that was the moment it all changed.

A harsh bell cut through the dark and still room, pulling them both back. Ben blinked at her in confusion for a moment, before turning for the intercom. He picked up the phone to the concierge and spoke quickly. Rey saw a change come over his body, a tightening, creeping and stone like. He hung up and turned back to her. His face was paler than before.

"Ben, what's wrong, what's happened?" she asked, feeling dread start to form in her stomach.

"I have to go." He said, suddenly brisk, pushing past her into his room. She followed behind, watching him pull a t-shirt over his head.

"Why? What's going on?" he was panicking, she could see it, and as he made to pass her, she grabbed his hands and held them.

"Tell me!" she demanded. He avoided her eyes, practically vibrating with tension.

"It's Eliza. She's been calling me all day, and I haven't got back to her. She overdosed. She left a note, the hospital called the front desk," he said, and Rey felt a building dread at the thought of him leaving.

"I'm so sorry, is she – is she going to be ok?" she asked.

"I don't know. I have to go" he said, prying her hands off his. He grabbed his jacket, picking up keys and his wallet.

"Take a taxi or something home tomorrow, ok? The front desk can call you one. Use the Solo account. They'll organise it all" he was saying, and Rey felt a building dread at the thought of him leaving.

"Ben!" she called as he opened the front door. He stopped on the threshold and looked back at her, the light from the hall illuminating the wild look on his face.

"It's not your fault" she said, and saw him flinch.
Wordlessly, he turned and pulled the door closed.
The grey light of dawn filtered through the blinds of Ben's window, and Rey watched the slated shadows move across the blank white wall. She had given up trying to sleep in the spare room a few hours ago and crawled into a bed that smelled like Ben, pressing her face into the indented pillow. It smelt like home, she realised as she heard the city gently waking around her.

She resisted the urge to check her phone. If Ben called, she'd hear it.

Recognising that sleep would be futile, she pulled herself up and got ready for a day she didn't want to face. She couldn't go to the hospital, as she hadn't even asked which one it was. She supposed she could ask at the front desk about the message Ben had gotten last night, but she was too afraid to just show up. She didn't know Eliza, and it seemed disrespectful to be worrying about her relationship with Ben when her life hung in the balance.

She forced herself to shower and get dressed. She ate some cereal for breakfast, listening to the drip of the tap echoing in the empty apartment. She found two tickets for the Hockney exhibition at the Met, dated for today. She felt like crying looking at them. She felt so bitterly disappointed that the weekend they were supposed to have been destroyed so thoroughly, and then guilty again. She hung around for a while longer, eyes shooting to the door at every sound, wanting to see Ben, tapping entry and stepping through the door. But he didn't come home.

Around lunchtime she called the concierge and asked for them to organise a car for her. She figured she could take the bus, but Ben would worry if he checked on her and she hadn't followed his advice. Today especially, she didn't want to worry him.

Looking around the apartment one more time, she pulled the door closed, remembering just yesterday, as he had given her the code in case she needed it.

The journey upstate took several hours, and Rey let her mind wander as she stared out the window. He would be upset, of course he would. But, hopefully Eliza would be fine, and she would get better, and everything could go back to normal. Everything would be normal again soon, Rey told herself, refusing to consider why she didn't quite believe it.

Rey snapped awake from the dream that had started to plague her again. It had been a recurring one since she was a child, and she lay paralysed and terrified in the grip of her old spectre. In the dream, she was always in a warehouse of some kind, with a lot of walkways and passages. She knew someone she loved was there too, but she couldn't find them. She walked tirelessly around,
searching, always just missing them, and somehow she knew in her heart that time was limited. She always woke up when she realised that she wouldn't be able to find them. That she would be alone, trapped, forever searching.

School on Monday after that fateful weekend had been an excercise in trying not to think about Ben and failing miserably. Every dark haired boy that passed, every door that opened and every time she check her phone, she looked for him.

He wasn't there, and he hadn't texted or called her either. That night, finally giving into temptation, she had messaged him.

*How is Eliza? I hope she is doing better. I hope you are doing better too. x*

She deliberated for ages over what to send, her heart twisting and turning as she pictured him reading it.

The rest of the night was excruciating, straining to hear her phone, waking to check it in the night. But it remained silent. Ben didn't respond. She told herself he was in the thick of it, and knowing him, was beating himself about it even more. It was hardly surprising that he hadn't responded, she reasoned with herself. She knew that was true, but as the week slid by without a reply, she couldn't ignore all her own vulnerabilities bubbling up.

She passed a miserable weekend, though her friends did try their level best to distract her, and she wouldn't prevent herself on Saturday night, as she lay awake in bed, once again staring at the wall, lost in the memories of the same time last week, before everything went to hell, from calling him. Her heart in her mouth, she heard the ringing start. Her optimism died as the ringing continued on and on before a voice mail message come through.

On Monday, with dark circles under her eyes and a head that was fuzzy with stress and anxiety, she pulled her hair back into her three buns, something she hadn't worn in a while, and trudged into school. She changed for gym in a daze, barely listening to the other girls as they gossiped and joked about the weekend. She sat on the edge of the group again, a lingering outsider once more and paid the teacher little attention as he went through the last form of martial arts they would cover, involving using sparring staffs. It was meant to even the playing field a little between genders, and Rey had been excited to try it, for once being the one to knock Ben on his ass. Now all she felt was an aching, squeezing loneliness.

"Partner up!" the teacher called, as people milled about, getting into pairs. Rey felt tears threaten. She lingered on the edge, not moving toward anyone, wondering if she'd have to work with the teacher.

"Rey and Ben, work together" the teacher called and Rey froze. Turning, as the couples cleared the way, she saw him.

Ben was sitting on the floor, his head down, his eyes far from hers. If she had made little effort to partner up, he had made even less it seemed.

A thousand thoughts flew through her mind at the sight of him. Relief that he was back, pain at not getting a call or message, curiosity about what had happened.

"Get moving!" the teacher gave a last irritated command, before heading off to observe other students. Ben slowly pushed himself to his feet and turned away from her. She thought for one terrible moment he was going to simply walk into the locker room and refuse to participate, it
wouldn't be the first time. He veered as he came to the doorway, and instead, went to the staffs leaning against the wall. He measured one against his shoulder, checking the right height, and then picked up another, lighter and shorter. Hefting them both, he turned back to her.

She followed him to a quiet corner of the gym, and took the staff he handed her, which happened to be the perfect height.

"Hi" she said, almost shyly.

"Hey" he replied, his brown eyes flickering briefly to her, before he turned back to the staff in his hands, starting to shift it from hand to hand, doing practise swings.

"You're back" she said, unnecessarily. He didn't reply to that, and continued to practise, spinning around, swirling the staff before him.

"Ben, what's going on" she said suddenly, throwing out her staff and striking his loudly. The reverberation was almost enough to pull the wooden pole from her grasp but she held on. He stillled, his expressive eyes shuttered and unreadable.

"With what?" he evaded, and Rey couldn't help the disbelieving snort that flew through her lips. He flinched at the sound, and she took the chance to step closer.

"How is Eliza?"

"Alive" he answered shortly.

"I'm so glad." Rey said, feeling genuine relief fill up her chest. She had barely known her, but the fragile and empty girl who had warned her about Ben, whether selflessly or not had been so lost, it was hard not to feel for her.

"And you… how are you?"

"Me? Why does it matter how I am" he bit out, his voice a controlled kind of anger.

"It matters because I care about you" Rey said slowly, trying to gauge his mood and failing. There was so much going on underneath that pained, closed exterior, and he was doing his best not to let her in.

"Well, maybe that's the problem" he said, and suddenly looked up at her. She was taken aback by the anger in his eyes, the sheer, roiling fury.

"Ben – don't push me away, that's not what we do, remember? I know you're upset" she started, and recoiled as Ben let out a bitter laugh.

"You think you know me Rey, after what? Half a year? You don't know anything about me, who I really am, what I am capable of" he said, suddenly stepping closer to her, and loomed over her.

"I do know you and exactly what you're capable of" she replied, thinking of the box hidden in his room, of silk ties and Eliza's face when Ben had rubbed her lips.

"You're such a naïve child, odd, considering your past" he said, and it hurt. She frowned at him, pushing herself to remember why he was lashing out.

"And you're such a jaded cynic, odd, considering yours."

"You don't know about my past"
"And you don't know about mine, but I do know you've never been homeless or cold. I know you've never had such an empty stomach that you couldn't sleep, couldn't think about anything else" she snarled, angry at him for pushing her away, and herself for allowing his defensive bullshit to get to her. He smiled then, it was just a baring of his teeth, there was no feeling behind it.

"That's right Rey, let it out, the hate, the resentment, the jealousy. Don't hide your true emotions towards me, maybe if you face them you'll realise the truth"

"What truth would that be?"

"That you should hate me." He breathed, and the look in his eyes, the terrible guilt and despair was a physical thing, like a slap to the face.

"Less talking, more sparring" the teacher called, appearing beside them. Rey schooled her shocked expression and moved through the routine the teacher had blocked for them. She felt Ben moving seamlessly around her, their staffs clacking as they met, lightly at first, then getting louder.

She was angry too, she realised as she blocked Ben's staff, and pushed it back hard. He stepped back with surprise, before continuing. She sent a blow skimming off his shoulder, knocking into his jaw, again, harder than she was supposed to, but her anger was becoming a physical thing. She was so furious at him for pushing her away, for being this easy to manipulate and command. Something bad happens and he reacts like a child throwing a tantrum.

She grunted with effort as he bore down on her a moment, and she used all her strength to push him back. He stumbled back, and she instinctively swept her staff lower, where it connected hard with his knee, and he fell backwards, landing hard on the matt, his head thumping as it came into contact with the floor. She stood over him, the fire in the veins dying down as she saw him lie there. She realised that she was acting exactly like he wanted her to. He wanted her to be horrible to him, push him away, hate him. Then it would validate all the insecurities he was currently feeling. She dropped her staff on the floor and stuck out her hand. He looked at it a long moment, before reaching out for it. He pulled himself up and dropped her hand like it had burned him. He reached around for the back of his head, wincing as he touched a tender spot.

"Are you ok?" She asked, gazing up at him.

"I'll live" he murmured, resisting the urge to lose himself in her hazel eyes, and the reflection of himself in them. Through Rey's eyes, he saw a man worth becoming, a man he'd want to be. But he wasn't that person, he couldn't be. There weren't enough broken pieces inside him to build a whole person.

"I shouldn't have said that." He said. He could feel her hesitation, her need to touch him, and tried his best to put distance between them wordlessly.

"What can I do?" she asked, following him as he took the staffs back to the rack, class already finishing.

"Nothing, there's nothing you can do. I have to be there for Eliza. It's the least I can do. I'm going down there at the weekend. Finals are starting, my mother has arranged my tutor to stay with me over them, get some extra practise in" he said, avoiding Rey's eyes. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"You sound like you'll be pretty busy…” she sounded forlorn, and it broke his worthless heart just that little bit more.
"I just… I just need a little space right now." He admitted, turning to her, and meeting her probing look full on. He knew Rey, he'd have to convince her staying away from him was for his own good, if he had a chance of her listening.

"Space from me?" she asked, and that splintered heart of his crunch like a boot on glass.

"Space from distractions" he correctly gently, and forced himself to touch her arm. It felt heavenly under his fingers, and he felt more unworthy than ever.

"And you are great many things to me Rey, everyone single of them is distracting"

"I just need this right now, please, understand" he murmured, and she stared at him so hard, he was afraid that she could see through to his blacked, withered soul. Slowly she nodded.

"If that's what you want" she muttered, and he could feel her disappointment and despondency.

He knew that it would work, because, at her core, Rey was just as broken as he was. He knew she would accept the implication that she was a burden, a distraction, something heavy to hold, even though she was the furthest from it. She felt had been a burden to everyone in her life, and she carried the guilt of that on her shoulders, he knew it, and even though it made him more of a bastard to exploit it, he did it anyway. Because Rey had to stay away from him. He had broken Eliza, with his selfish and twisted behaviour. He wouldn't break Rey. To break Rey would be to give up on living once and for all, to cast all hope aside and live in darkness. Rey was looking at him with such sadness, he felt his own throat close, and the fury of his weakness flowed through him again, strengthening his resolve.

"Speak to you soon, kid. Ok?" he said, squeezing her arm. She nodded listlessly.

"Promise?" she whispered, and he could barely meet her eye as he nodded.

"Ok, this is perfect." Rey said, sliding along the booth of Finn's favourite diner and grinning at the little jigsaw Finn had laid out before her one the table. It was deep purple, with swirling gold, and in the centre, it simply read Prom?

"Are you sure?" he asked, breaking up the pieces and dropping them into a velvet bag. He looked nervous, and Rey was enjoying every second. Of course, she already had an idea of what Rose' reaction might be.

"I think it's cute. She'll love it" she reassured him.

"Man, you are definitely overthinking this" Poe teased as he approached, bearing a tray with drinks. He said down beside Rey and passed her a milkshake.

"If you're not even going, you don't get an opinion" Finn snapped at his best friend. Poe laughed.
"Who says I'm not going?"

"You did, about a month ago"

"Well, I've changed my mind. I have to see the results of all this myself" he said, waving his hand at puzzle bag.

"I just mean I don't think you should go to such dramatic lengths, you know? It's too much pressure, it makes it awkward" Poe said.

"So you would do it differently?" Finn challenged. Poe grinned.

"Absolutely I would. Watch and learn my friend." He said, and turned to Rey, his playful smile infectious.

"Rey, I would be honoured if you would consider letting me escort you to Prom" Rey laughed, playing along as she took his outstretched hand.

"Why, what an unexpected and courteous request. I cannot fail but say yes" she laughed, and froze as Poe lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across her fingers.

"I can't wait" he said, and the suddenly serious look in his eyes stole her breath.

"Wait… what?" she said, turning to look at Finn. Poe sat back, laying an arm across the back of her seat, his handsome face smug.

"And that is how you do it" Poe said. Rey looked between the two guys.

"Are you joking?" she finally asked. Poe turned back to her, and saw the tiniest crack in his confident façade.

"Actually, I'm not. Surprise!" he said, a lopsided grin on his face.

"I want to take you to Prom Rey. Will you go with me?" he asked again. Rey felt her face heat up, and stammered out an answer.

"Are you sure? I mean there are lots of girls who'd want to go with you… you know, not just… friends" she said lamely, her colour only heightening as Poe said slowly.

"I don't want to go with you as friends" She stared at him, silence falling between them until Finn cleared his throat.

"Yeah, great tip man, this is far less awkward"

She waited at the bus stop later, her hands stuffed into her shorts pockets, sunglasses perched on her nose, watching the downtown traffic fly by. She had told Poe yes. The very fact of it made her chew her fingernails, already worn down to the quick by the last few weeks.

There had been no other answer, because Poe was her friend, and she couldn't hurt his feelings. He was handsome and funny, and he made her feel relaxed and at ease. But he wasn't Ben. Why couldn't she just like Poe back, and go on fun, carefree dates without the yawning chasm of all their combined issues below them.

The thought of Ben was a wound that she couldn't stop touching. It had been four weeks, and they had exchanged a handful to messages since then. She always initiated contact, trying to chase her
demons away, her fears that he would disappear completely. He did answer, slowly usually, and shortly. But an answer was an answer, enough to keep her heart tied to his string.

She squinted into the late afternoon sun, looking for the bus that was supposed to be coming. And almost like thinking about him had summoned him, she saw Ben's car approaching. She was frozen by indecision for a long moment, whether to wave, would he see, or just pretend she hadn't noticed him, so when he drove by, it wouldn't be an insult.

As she was still deliberating, she saw the indicator come on, and then he was pulling up beside her, blocking the bus stop. The other people waiting eyed her as she went over to the open window and looked up at him.

He was wearing a black t-shirt and sunglasses, and the familiarity of him made her feel like she had just gotten home from a long trip.

"When are you gonna learn how to drive, kid?" he asked.

"Maybe when someone buys me a car" she replied, and saw one of those rare smiles touch his lips. A peep sounded behind them, and she saw the bus had arrived.

"Get in, I'll drop you" he instructed. She hesitated.

"I can just get the bus"

"Get in Rey" he commanded bossily. She huffed, shifting her backpack, but dutifully walked around the care and got in.

"You are so annoying when you boss me around" she complained as she buckled herself in, the thrill of being so close to Ben after so long making her a little giddy.

"Are you so adorable when you capitulate." He said, pulling out into the stream of cars.

"Soooo… how are your finals going?" she asked, looking ahead, unable to sit and stare at him as she wanted to, because she was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to help all her worthless questions and insecurities from spilling out.

"They are going" he replied, his eyes closed her to by the black sunglasses.

Ben was grateful for them at that moment, suddenly sitting next to Rey, the real physical Rey. Not the one that had developed in his head, that spectre that watched him and accompanied him almost constantly. This Rey was wearing jean shorts and a thin, summery camisole, and it was all he could so not to stare open mouthed at the way bands of sunlight wear travelling up her slim, tones legs, which were already tinged with a golden tan.

"You're graduating soon" she stated. He nodded, and felt a prickle of unease creep over him, almost afraid of her next words.

"Have you decided what'll you do after? Where you're going?" she asked it lightly, but the question was loaded with unspoken meaning. Did he still plan on going where she could follow?

"No. I haven't thought about it" he lied. She must have known it was a lie, the date for accepting entrance well past, but she didn't say anything. Pink tinged her throat.

"What were you doing downtown?"
"Helping Finn ask Rose to their prom." She said sadly. She pulled at a thread on her shorts.

"Are you… going to prom?"

"Not at St Augustines" she said, wrinkling her nose at the thought.

"Insorto? Don't you need a date to go to that one?" he pressed, already knowing they were on dangerous ground, and already rushing toward the inevitable pain almost within reach.

"Yeah… I do." She said quietly.

"Well, sounds good. Have fun" he said shortly. They had reached the turning for Jacks. Rey gripped her bag.

"Just let me out here, I can walk" she instructed, and was promptly ignored as Ben turned along toward the cottage. He pulled up and stopped, silence and stillness crowding the space between them.

"Ben. Are you ok?" she suddenly asked, turning to him. He wanted to be honest with her in that moment, and tell her how very far from ok he was. How alone and afraid he felt, how Snoke was pressuring him in certain directions and his parents had been more withdrawn than ever. He wanted to tell her how Eliza clung to him at the weekends, when he visited her, awkward and quiet, their encounters were spiked with her devotion and his avoidance, all her pain and trauma about her father centred on him, looking at him like he was her salvation, when it was all he could do to keep from calling Rey, just to hear her voice, to hear her breath, to know that she existed somewhere, like a light, so far away in the darkness, a direction to walk in the only thing keeping you going.

"I'm fine" he murmured, and started as her hand landed on his.

"I miss you" she said, her eyes suddenly looking glassy. He was captivated by that look.

"I miss you too" he replied, honestly.

'What's the point in us both missing each other?' she asked, and he wished he could be that brave.

"Are you going to tell me where you're going to college? Will I see you again after you graduate?" she asked, seemingly unable to hold back the questions that were keeping her up at night. He closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose to alleviate the pressure there.

"Rey –"

"Don't say something meaningless comment about needing time, or how we will always be friends or something" she warned, and he had a horrible feeling she was going to cry. It was selfish of him, but he was sure in that moment, that if she did, he would never recover from it.

"Why did you change your mind about me? What did I do?" she asked, her tear-filled eyes meeting his, and the raw emotion of that statement, and the absurdity of her questions, as thought there was a chance of him ever forgetting her, struck him as unacceptable.

He acted without thinking, without restraint, throwing off his seatbelt, he wrapped a hand around the back of her head and pulled her face to his.

As their lips met, it was like breaking the surface of a lake, after so very long drowning under the water, it was like feeling the sun again in the Spring after a hard winter. It was everything. She melted into him, as fierce and soft and possessive and gentle as he was.
She felt all her longing flow from her at his touch, and then blast back, Ben's answering hunger stealing her breath. He pulled her closer, his hands in her hair, stroking her cheek, tugging her closer and closer. His lips were moving across her lips, then up her jaw and along to her ear. Her own fingers were buried in his black locks, digging in, tugging and twisting.

His mouth moved to her throat with an imperceptible pause, and the new sensation, rough and soft on the virgin skin of her neck sent all restraint fleeing. Gripping his shoulders, she broke contact, Ben's rough groan of disappointment sending her hair on end, long enough to stand, swinging her leg over the central aisle of the car, the high ceiling and roomy interior presenting no problem, and straddled him, still seated in the drivers seat. As she settled, the sudden, unavoidable intimacy of her new position, her face before his, her legs snugly tucked around his thighs, stilled them both. They stared into each other's eyes, and he slowly raised his hands on either side of her body, dragging upwards from her hips to her shoulders, trailing fire in their wake, up to her face. He ran the pads of his thumbs over her cheeks and across her lips. She mimicked his movements, resting her palms against his broad chest, running her fingers tightly over the slim muscles there, the ridge of his collarbones. He shifted his hips under her, and she closed her eyes, head tipping back as the most heady, delicious slow curl of heat radiating up through her body. All her solitary explorations and imaginings falling so woefully short of the real thing. She rolled her hips, once, twice, grinding them against each other, the slight gusset of her shorts doing little to prevent the electric shocks sparking against her from his hard body. She heard herself pant his name against his lips, her eyes hooded with desire.

"Rey-" he breathed back, his chest rising and falling with just as much violence as hers. She couldn't know how this position scared him, unsettled him, changed the dynamic he made it a point to establish. He was supplicant beneath her, out of control, short on focus, unmanned. And yet, there was a sweet feeling of surrender in his chest, for this was Rey, and he trusted her.

When the sharp rap on the window split the moment in two, there was a part of him that was relieved, the rational part, though his heart rebelled and railed against the loss of that intimacy, never mind the jolt to his overworked body.

They both looked to see Jack standing by the window, a censorious expression on his face, and he felt Rey tense instantly, the fluid, melting warmth of her on top of him gone, as she scrambled back to her side, and then out the car.

He clenched his hands and took a moment to climb out, aware that he was looking every bit as dishevelled as she was.

"Rey, dinners ready" Jack said tersely. She nodded, coming around to Ben's side. He felt the brush of her hand against his, and suddenly, unseen to Jack, she wrapped her hand around his. He felt that lump in his throat again, hard and unyielding.

"Would you care to join us?” Jack's voice was judgemental, condemning the boy who'd sit and make out with his niece with reckless abandon outside, but not have the manners to come in.

"I would love to Sir, but I have a final tomorrow, and extra tutoring tonight" he said as politely as he could. Jack nodded shortly, before looking at Rey.

"I suppose this is goodbye for tonight then" Jack said, making no move to leave. Rey turned and looked up at him, and he looked over her swollen lips and rumpled hair, a primal, animal part of him relishing in being the one to have caused it, relishing that she wore the mark of him for anyone to see. It was base and immature and yet, undeniable.

"Good luck tomorrow" she said quietly.
“Thank you” he replied, though his thoughts were not on his last exam, he could barely bring himself to care about any of that.

“Rey, inside” Jack finally ordered, having had enough of their lingering. Rey made to pull away, and then stopped herself, glancing down at the hidden handhold. He suddenly realised he was holding tightly to her hand, pressing hard, almost painfully. He immediately let go, worried he’d hurt her, and watched Jack usher her into the cottage.

“Your distracted and unfocused and that girl is the cause. I thought I had taught you better than this” Snoke said, and Ben felt the weight of his judgement.

“I'm disappointed in you” his teacher finished.

“I'm sorry”

“How quickly you forget the remnants of your love, lying in a hospital bed in the city. Have you already chosen this young girl to be the next… victim of your love?” Snoke purred, and Ben bit down bile at the thought of Rey ending up like Eliza.

“Eliza was ill before I met her. Her father –”

“Wasn't there… you were there. And the darkness in her called out to you, her loneliness and vulnerability. She wanted you because she saw him in you.” Snoke said, and Ben stared at him, appalled.

“Do not pretend you haven't realised the very same things yourself”

“I would never. Eliza was just a child-” he stammered, horror growing in his veins at his mentors words.

“And how old if your little distraction? How old is…. Rey” his blood turned to ice at the sound of her name on Snoke's lips.

“Old enough” Ben said, though he didn't really believe it. Snoke held his gaze a touch longer, before turning back to the window he was standing before, his arms clasped neatly behind his back.

“Not all perversions are the same. Some men enjoy youth, some men enjoy control. Some men enjoy pain” he glanced sideways at Ben.

“Time will tell, what sort of man you will be, young Solo” Ben thought about his father for a moment, thinking how he had never courted darkness, as Snoke talked about.

“And some men enjoy mediocrity” the professor said, showing his usual cunning insight into Ben's
"I suppose your vision and ambition must be tested in order to grow, and you are but young. But, heed me Ben, you must use this opportunity to develop. The girl holds too much sway over you. How can it be rectified?"

"By stopping seeing her? Cutting her out my life" Ben asked, even though he doubted he could do it. Snoke watched him with a knowing look.

"By keeping her at a distance?" Ben tried again, all the while avoiding his mentors all too knowing look.

"I doubt that is an option. Regardless, you would hardly be winning in that scenario. The true win would be to address the power imbalance. Having her at your disposal as you wish is in your best interests, letting her have influence over you is not. Think of a way to achieve this, to have her at your mercy… it interests you, does it not?" Snoke murmured, and Ben flushed at the thought.

He couldn't deny there was a part of him that longed to control Rey. To have her submission, sweet and pure. To be able to count on her light, even in his greatest darkness. And yet, the other part of him, the one that still remembered the look in his mother's eyes when she had read his calligraphic poem, knew that in gaining that submission, he risked her light.

Rey caged and bound would not be Rey, and that was no option at all.

And in that moment he saw the recurring nightmare he had started to have, in which it was not Eliza in the dull little room, tiny, in a huge hospital bed, being fed by a tube, because she refused to eat or drink herself. It was Rey. That image was enough to remind him why he couldn't let his heart, his weakness, rule him and his decisions for them. He had allowed himself the sweet dream of imagining a life with Rey in it, the two of them, running around New York, young and in love. How foolish that all seemed now. He could only be himself, and he was a person who broke things.

He wouldn't break her.

Rey lay in bed that same night, face once again enveloped in synthetic light, her expression rapt. She had to do something, something to stop Ben from drifting away from her, something to reach him. She could see him, closing off avenues to his feelings, using his anger as a barrier against his emotions. That moment in the car, he had been Ben again, her Ben, for one shining moment. And when she had stood outside with Jack, and Ben had gripped her hand so hard, she had known, it was his body, his heart, crying out for help, sending a secret plea.

Rey didn't give up on people, she never had, and she never would. And she wouldn't give up on Ben. It was a risk, a huge gamble, but she was hoping the shock of it was unbalance him, divert him from the dark lonely path he was heading down, separating himself from her and everyone
else. It was her only hope.

Chapter End Notes

This will unfortunately be one of the last chapters featuring Ben Solo, the forlorn teen, and he won't be making an appearance for quite a while, though his alter ego will be around for sure.

If you have read my other stories (ff.net/different fandom) then you know my penchant for angst... if not... I apologise in advance. It's about to get rough.

Comments are my sustenance... I'm so happy to hear what you think of things and how they are developing.
You guys are spoiling me with the comments, kudos etc, thank you so much, what a lovely fandom Reylos are

This is it... bye byeteenaged angsty Rey and Ben... see you on the other side xx

The thought of buying lingerie in a shop was intimidating. The thought of buying the kind of lingerie she had imagined buying was out of the question. And so, Rey bought a roll of stretchy wide black elastic and black ribbons and got to work. It had to be black, because that was Ben's colour. She formed loops of the elastic to go around the tops of her thighs and waist, tying strategic ribbons from the taut fabric, and fastening them in an approximation of the outfits she had seen online. She already knew that Ben's parents weren't coming to his graduation, both travelling at the time. She knew because he had given her a ticket and asked her to come. She would attend alongside his tutor, the man who he had been at his side since he was a boy. She knew Ben wouldn't be attending any of the parties afterwards, and decided that Graduation would be the perfect night.

That morning, she hovered by the window nervously. She was all dressed, a knee length floral dress she'd found cheaply, liking the sweet pattern, even though it was a little old fashioned. Her hair had been encouraged into big loose curls, and for the first time, she had gone through her little make up routine.

She was watching for Ben's car, because the last thing she wanted was for him and Jack to figure out that she'd lied to both of them about her plans afterwards.

She had an overnight bag with her, small and discreet, as small as most girls handbags. Ben thought they would hangout after the ceremony and then he'd bring her home. Jack thought Ben was dropping her off at Rose' after the ceremony.

She saw the glint of sun off the glass of the car, slowly coming up the drive, and raced out. She bounded down the path with all of her usual athletic exuberance, and grinned at Ben as he stepped out. He was wearing a button down white shirt, tie and black suit. It looked strange to see him out of a hoodie or t-shirt.

"You look weird" she said immediately.

"And there I was going for dashing." He smiled back, his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses. He stared at her a touch too long, and she folded her arms over her chest.

"Well, is this ok?" she demanded, suddenly worried how her bargain bin outfit would fit in at the exclusive graduation of St Augustines.

"You look perfect" he said quietly, and she felt her heart squeeze. He opened the back door for her and she slid in, seeing the back of an older man's head in front of her.

"Hi, I'm Rey" she said, leaning around to stick her hand out. The man looked down at the proffered
gesture, before shaking her hand with the tip of his fingers awkwardly.

"I'm professor Snoke"

"I know, I've heard so much about you" she said, putting her seatbelt on, and seeing Ben's eyes flash to her in the mirror.

"As I have you, my dear" the older man murmured, and for some reason, Rey didn't think it was a compliment.

The set up for the ceremony was outside, with the breathtaking façade of St Augustine's a backdrop. Ben left them in their assigned seats, second row from the front, and went to take his place with the other students. Rey looked at the programme in her hand, the beautiful view, the red sandstone for the school in sharp contrast to the cornflower sky. The sun was beating down on them, and she felt sweat start to bead her lip. She hated being too hot. It reminded her of the endless summers of the city, following her mother from air-conditioned cafés, to cool dark bars and sometimes even the movies. Anywhere to escape the heat. Those had been the good days, when they'd drank cool sodas and lay in the shadows of the park all afternoon. The other days, when her mother couldn't or wouldn't get out of bed were the bad memories. Stuffy apartments without even a window to crack, as painted or nailed shut as they were. Warm, metallic water from the tap and the sticky feeling of all your clothes sliding against sweat soaked skin, even your fingers smearing the paper pages of a book. She turned to Snoke to see him watching her with narrowed eyes.

"Have you adjusted.. young Rey, to this life of privilege thrust upon you?" he asked suddenly, eerily close to her previous thoughts.

"I don't know." She thought about it and then shook her head.

"No, I haven't, I don't think I ever really will."

"Yes, once you have seen beyond the veil, there is no true return to ignorance. The world is a dark place, full of suffering. These students will never understand how little separates them from the rest." Snoke said.

"What about Ben?"

"Ben understands that there is much he cannot understand without greater experiences. To free yourself of society and its judgements, to liberate yourself from the chains of morality and arbitrary rules and laws, is to be truly free" Snoke said. Rey glanced at him.

"But – without morality, what would we do?" she asked, confused by the turn of the conversation. She had the feeling he was judging her every response, weighing her intellect and comprehension, and there was a sickening urge to please him, even as she didn't particularly agree with his words.

"Whatever we wanted" he finished, and broke his low stare to look at the podium, where the Principle had just stepped up.

She watched Hux graduate, hating his smug smile as he accepted his diploma. She clapped as Catherine Phasma collected hers. Then, Ben was stepping onto the stage. He turned and found her eyes in the crowd, a small smile on his lips, she raised her phone and took an actual picture for once.

Afterwards, they got back into his car, the other student dispersing with parents in various vehicles.
to go for lunches and parties.

Snoke had invited Rey to accompany them to lunch, which he was hosting. They drove there in near silence, and Rey couldn't hear the quiet words exchanged between Ben and his teacher in the front of the car.

The place Snoke took them to was strange. It was in a basement for one, and as they descended the stone steps outside, Rey hated the way the light diminished. Inside there was a heavy and sullen energy, and as she sat in the heavy, red velvet chair, she looked around and saw few other people. There was so much red, in this room, she had trouble distinguishing the heavy brocade wall paper from the velvet curtains separating a stage that the end. It seemed to be a night club, and had that strange feeling of being somewhere you're not supposed to be, like it should only be alive at night, and being there at lunchtime was disobeying its wishes.

Rey picked at her food, her mind drifting in and out of the conversation. They were talking about advances in a chemical process, something about rendering a solid into a gas by using kinetic energy and not another chemical as an activator, with the aim of efficiency and speed. She found it incredibly boring. She took a sip of the drink by her hand and almost choked. It was fruity and strong, and without a doubt, she knew it had alcohol in it. She looked to Snoke who was watching her unsophisticated reaction with the slightest hint of distant.

"Sorry, I've never had… wine before" she explained, rubbing her mouth on her napkin, and wishing she could scrub her tongue as well.

"It is quite the common practice in European countries, to accompany meals, in children as young as 14. It is really quite an American practice, to infantilize children well beyond their years, 21, it beggars belief." Snoke was saying. Rey watched as Ben sipped his own glass, though it seemed dutiful to her.

"You don't have to drink it, if you don't like it" Ben said to her.

"Though, it would be frightfully rude, if you didn't" Snoke countered, and Rey saw his eyes were not actually on her but on his star pupil. Ben didn't reply.

"I'm not really that thirsty. It's good though" Rey said placating, forcing another sip down, better now she was prepared.

The long and excruciating lunch finally ended, and they went back to the car. Rey was starting to get nervous. The little bit of wine and tiny amount of food she'd eaten roiling in her stomach as her thoughts flew to her overnight bag and the rigged-up outfit in it. Ben was quiet, and she felt like he was building up to saying something important. Of course, time had run out for avoiding the talk they had to have. Ben had graduated. With everything that had happened with Eliza, and Ben pulled so firmly away from Rey, she couldn't guess what was going on in his head anymore. But, if she was to change the future that seemed to be rushing at her, she had to do it now. A future without Ben even as a friend, was too awful to contemplate.

They dropped Snoke off at some crumbling Victoria house on the edge of town. It looked a like a murder house, Rey thought mutinously as she watched the man leave their sight. She relaxed a little, now the creepy and staring presence of the man was gone, though fresh nerves sprung up in their wake.

Ben drove to his house, and as he helped her out the car, her bag clutched in her hands, she wondered if it might be the last time. The thought made her want to cry, so she shook it off and forced gaiety, teasing Ben about Snoke, and the lunch and the ceremony and basically anything she
could think of.

Inside was cool, with sunlight filtering through the floor length windows. They went to the family wing.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked, as they stopped outside his door.

"Can I have a coke?" she asked hopefully, looking forward to getting rid of the taste of the wine. He smiled widely.

"Sure"

"I'll just... get changed, if you don't mind. This isn't super comfy" she said, gesturing at the tea dress. He leaned away from her for a long moment, looking her up and down, before framing her with his fingers, their old forgotten gesture.

"What are you doing?"

"Remembering" he said simply, clicking his imaginary shutter, before ambling down the hall. Rey watched him go, and then darted into his room, her heart pounding. Once inside, she locked the door and set her bag down. She pulled out candles she'd brought, and lit them, horrified to see her hands were shaking ever so slightly. She stripped the covers off his bed, leaving a black canvas. She closed the blinds, and an intimate glow suffused the room. She took off her dress and underwear, putting it all in her bag, and then took out her outfit. She strained and struggled to climb into it, standing before the full-length mirror, she positioned the straps and ribbons until it looked more purposeful and less like a craft experiment gone awry.

She pulled her hair back in a ponytail, because she'd the hairstyle a lot during her research. It was versatile and easy to control motion through. She stopped for a long moment, her mind racing. She was going to have sex. She was going to have sex for the first time, and she was going to do it with Ben. She chose him, and she was making it happen. A knock at the door sounded, and she jumped several inches off the floor.

"You decent?" he called, and she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, wild eyed, her cheeks tinged pink with anticipation and her chest, rising and falling with excitement.

"Almost' she called back, before darting to the wardrobe and hunting for the box she'd seen. After a frantic moment, she found it, and pulled it out, picking up various items from it, she arranged them on the floor before her in a line. She went to the door and almost silently turned the lock.

Scrambling back, she knelt down behind the toys of the floor, and folded her feet under her, her hands on the tops of her thigh and took a deep breath.

She was just about to change their relationship, irrevocably, and through it, change the future she could see had been speeding toward her. One where Ben left her, like her mother had, though, even worse because he's have chosen specifically to do that.

She willed her heart to stop pounding, her breath to even out. She breathed deeply and calmly, and let her heart mind focus on Ben. Her heart filled up at the thought of him and she felt that terrifying emotion strengthen her spine.

"Come in" she called.
When Ben walked into the room, at first he couldn't make anything out, so abrupt was the departure from the light hallway.

He had lingered in the kitchen, staring out the windows to the terrace and orangery beyond. Summer was thick in the air, and the flowers and lawn were a riot of colours, each one hurting his heart even more. Rey would love the gardens in summer, he thought glumly. It had been a tense day, seeing Rey and Snoke side by side. His teacher had behaved as well as Ben could expect, and he had been touched at how hard Rey had been trying to be good, grown up and well behaved, despite being tempted otherwise, he thought with a glint of humour. Rey hadn't liked Snoke, he could feel it coming off her in waves, dislike and discomfort and yet, she had put up with it for him. To make a memory worth having, Rey watching him graduate.

He knew what he had to do, to be free of the pain he felt. What to do about Rey, had been the issue on his mind for weeks. The other day in the car had shown him that there was little chance of being platonic friends. He burned for her too hotly, and she seemed to feel the same.

If he had a chance of changing himself, becoming the great man Snoke assured he could be, he must be alone, or at the very least, his heart should not be touched by another. He would be a man his parents admired and respected, someone they would listen to, when he talked. He would be a man who didn't feel his aching loneliness with every single breath, every single day. He would be a man for whom no one would cry, no one would bleed or be hurt for. A man that someone like Rey could never love, and in that way, he would keep her safe.

He stepped into the room, and blinked in the soft light.

"Rey?" he asked, setting the cold can of coke on his bedside table and turning to search for her.

He froze at the sight before him.

The golden light licked over her exposed skin, and as his shocked brain tried to take in the image, it took him a good few seconds to understand that the golden, impossibly smooth fabric Rey was wearing was her skin. As soon as that slipped into focus, everything else was visible. Bare stomach and thighs, arms and legs, the long column of her neck and the delicate collarbones beneath. He could see it all. He saw the black underwear, it was strange looking, and did little to hide her body. And it was a beautiful body, he couldn't take his eyes of it. He could see the underside of her breast, the slight, but heavy weight of those high and firm curves. He could see where her slender waist dipped in further to hug her petite ribs, and flared out to join her thighs. He went to speak, and found his mouth too dry to make a sound.

It was then he started to notice the rest. The toys, his toys, laid out before her. Her submissive position, her head bent, her eyes lowered. A forest fire ripped through him at the image from his deepest and darkest fantasies, plucked from that secret place, and kneeling before him.

"Rey" he managed to croak after a long moment. She didn't answer, just waited for him to do something, say something else. The whole moment was incredibly surreal.

"Rey, what are you doing?" he asked again, and she continued to ignore him, though he could see a fierce blush working up her chest.
"Answer me" he suddenly commanded, and the shift in tone made her jump to attention. She shifted slightly, her ponytail bobbing behind her as her hazel eyes flicked to his for the tiniest second.

"I want to be with you, in your way" she said, and he admired how her voice barely wavered.

"Explain" he commanded again, sinking into the chair she had placed before her, looking down his legs at her, ignoring the urge to cover her shoulders with a towel.

"I know what you think is wrong with you. It doesn't have to be wrong, there is nothing wrong with you. I want to show you" she said quietly. He wanted to laugh and cry all at once.

"I know you feel guilty about Eliza, of course you do. But it's not your fault." She said, suddenly tilting her head up and fixing him with a determined look.

"I want you." She continued, suddenly, and her bravery made his own cowardice even more clear. Why? He ignored the voice in his head, the one that urged him to consider the damage Rey must have endured in her short life, to want someone like him. Someone so thoroughly broken.

"Don't you want me?" she suddenly asked, her voice sounding so very small. It was painful, the way she was looking at him, her trusting face so open and warm, her eyes full of hope and optimism. And, as it always did, those strong emotions, the answer to her call, were drowned by a hard flush of anger. It skittered along his veins, and behind came its fellow spectre, his old friend. Fear. It had already started, he realised, his corruption of the perfection that was Rey. The taint of her light. His presence in her life had already started to infect her. She would be sharing a room with Eliza any day now.

His heart was being torn in two. The part that beat for her, was made whole and better by her was being destroyed with the other part of him, the dark and destructive part that revelled in her submission and wished to visit every fantasy he had ever harboured over her beautiful, unsullied face and body. To have Rey, the shining beacon of survival and triumph over adversity kneeling at his feet. It made him feel ten feet tall, and like dirt simultaneously.

"Get up" he said softly. She sprang to her feet immediately, interrupting his order as a beginning of the scene.

"Put clothes on" he snapped, suddenly afraid his restraint was hanging by a thread, and so white hot anger at himself for letting this happen. She faltered, instead approaching him carefully.

"Ben, what's wrong?" she asked hesitantly. He bit back an incredulous laugh.

"What's wrong? Look at yourself." He gestured at her outfit, close up he could see it was her own handiwork, and the thought of her applying herself to such a task actually hurt.

"You – you don't like it?" she asked, and he closed his eyes tight, torn apart anew. The words to reassure her that it was more than anyone had ever offered him, that it made him feel things he didn't know he could.

That he loved her, he had for a long time, and it scared him to death. But then, the part of him that had worried how he would push her away saw its opportunity. The part that longed for her to have normal relationships and a simple, joyful, uncomplicated love saw its chance.

"I don't see you that way Rey. Please, put some clothes on" he said, his voice tight, silently begging her not to see the obvious lie in her eyes.
"You did last week, in the car" she argued back, of course she would, because Rey did not really have a submissive bone in her body. She might be acting like it, willing to play that part to please him, but she was untameable and wild, and he loved her even more for it.

"Well, when you jump on a guy and grind about on their lap, that tends to happen. It doesn't mean that we should try to be anything more" he said, and saw the hurt of his words hit her. She frowned, her hands hesitating at her sides, as she obviously squashed the instinct to cover herself.

"Don't lie to me Ben. Before we went to New York, you wanted us to be together. I know it." She said, looking him right in the eye.

"Ok, I did feel that way, for a second. It passed and reality came back. You're just a kid"

"If you say that one more time-" she warned, crossing her arms.

"You'll what?"

"It's a bullshit excuse and you know it" she stated, her cheeks blazing, her eyes boring into his. He stood over her, so close he could touch her, and how he longed to touch her. He could already imagine how soft and warm her skin would be. She was staring at him angrily, and he could feel her hurt pride, the sting of his rejection resting on her vulnerable form.

"You're so afraid. I didn't realise you were such a coward" She whispered, and he flinched at the words.

"Well, at least I'm not prostituting myself for affection" he snapped back. As soon as the words were said, the fear magnified a million-fold. She blinked, and her mouth twisted. He had hurt her, he could see it.

"I guess you think it runs in the family, right? Like mother like daughter" she pressed. The words made him sick, and he longed to refute them, to apologise and castrate himself at her feet, but the he was frozen still.

"I know you're trying to push me away. I know you, Ben Solo" she said suddenly, and his flailing heart grabbed onto it.

"You don't know me, kid" he said, turning away, a feeling resignation falling over him, so completely it was all he could do not to sit down and weep. He grabbed a hoodie from the back of the door and handed it to her. This time she covered up, pushing her slim arms into the long sleeves.

"You don't know me, and you don't know yourself" he said.

"Don't tell me-"

"You don't know what's best for you, because believe me, it's not me, it's not us"

"That's my choice"

"Yeah, well, it's a bad one. And one you're not old enough to make" His head jerked sharply to the side as she slapped him. It echoed in the sudden silence that followed it.

"I warned you not to call me young again" she breathed angrily.

"And I warned you - to get away from me, while you still can" he breathed, stepping in closer to
her, mirroring her posture. He could feel her breath on his face, her eyes, wide and angry and beautiful beyond measure.

"Why are you so scared?" she murmured, her eyes searching his face for the answer.

"Why aren't you?" he asked, and suddenly felt her hands come up to his cheeks and pull his face to hers. She kissed him hard, biting at his lips, trying to gain entry with her tongue, and it was a long moment before he pulled back.

"I have to take you home" he said, with a solemn finality. She kept looking up into his face, and he was horrified to find his eyes feeling wet.

"You don't really know me Rey. The Ben you know, believe it or not, was the best version of me, as shit as he was. The real me, underneath that Ben – he's a monster" he said softly. A tear ran suddenly down Rey's cheek, and he caught it.

"Don't waste your tears on a dead boy. You don't know me, and I'm glad. I'm so glad. I break everything I touch. I would break you too. I would to tie you to that bed and fuck you so hard, you couldn't walk for a week, because I can't be gentle. I would dedicate myself to enslaving your body, your heart and soul." Rey is looking warily at him, biting her lip, and he pushes on, trying desperately to make her understand.

"I would pay for your college, so you'll always be indebted to me, and I can know where you are at all times. I would make you live in my apartment, so I can be sure that you'll be there when I get home, so I can relax and stop worrying that you might not be. I would get you pregnant as quickly as possible, so your future was bound to mine. Forever. No take backs. No outs. I would do all those things because that is who I am, that's how my mind works. I would chain you to me with invisible bonds of guilt, debt and desire until you lost yourself."

Rey is just staring at him, wide eyed, and he sees with deflated satisfaction that he has indeed reached her.

"And now you see, you should be more afraid of me. I'm not a good man, Rey. I never will be. So give this up now."

"Why do you hate yourself, so much?" she asked, another tear dripping down her cheek.

"The real question, the one that you would start to ask yourself before too long, is why don't you hate me more… and then …you would."

"Get dressed. I'll be downstairs" he said, and turned away. With every step to the door he knew he was doing irreparable damage, leaving her in tears, confused and hurt behind him. That was what he wanted, he reminded himself, to have her hate him. To save her. It was all to save her, he reminded himself, not letting himself dwell on why he felt like such a coward.

As she finally came downstairs, breaking his brooding, alone in the dark on the bottom stair, she looked defiant. She might be down, but she wasn't beaten. He admired that.

"I can't understand you, Ben. I... this is pathetic" she said, wincing as she said the words, but seemingly unable not to. His pride, tattered as it was tore further at her tone. He didn't care much what people thought about him, except Rey. She seemed to be the exception to every rule he had ever made.

"Pathetic is trying to find a way for us to fit into each others lives. What do you even think my parents would say? You're nothing, you come come no one, there isn't a place for you here" the
words were dispassionate, just a frank contrast of their unbringings, something he couldn't care less about, but as soon as he'd finished speaking, he saw the hurt fill her eyes. And just like that he succeeded in severing the gossamer chord between them.

"Let's go" she said tightly, gripping her bag to her chest.

Jack never asked why she came home early. The car ride back had been silent as a tomb, with each second building up more and more things they would never say to each other, the painful regret of words unspoken between two people who had meant so much to each other for a bright and burning moment.

She had looked at him in before getting out, the overhead lights harsh and flat above them. He had refused to meet her eyes, and so she had left, unable to watch the boy she loved destroy himself for one more second, ignoring her help. Ignoring her offer of love. It hurt too much. She hurt for him and because of him at the same time. He didn't want her, and he didn't want her to want him either. And he was too much of a coward to try. She heard the car reversing, and then crunch of the tires along the gravel.

She didn't look back.
The spaces in-between

Chapter Notes

Ok, a little abstract, but these are little snap shots - little glimpses of the years apart, 3 from Ben and 3 from Rey, also they are chronological.

It gives a snap shot of how their lives were apart, where their heads are in relation to each other. It also hints at some questions you might be wondering about what they did after high school... if you want to guess))) Thank you so much for the support, I really really appreciate it. I haven't been feeling great about writing lately, but you guys... you make it feel fun again.

Also - even though this is AU, these snap shots aim to show an AU version of the force bond - how even apart, they felt connected, as I feel like its such a fundamental part of their relationship dynamic, that these two people are connected in a way that goes beyond physical.

Also... musical accompaniment for each snippet... these are songs I often use when writing about them, and set the tone for the glimpse - if you want to listen while reading, it makes it better!

Ben

“Tell me where’s your hiding place, I’m worried I’ll forget your face”

Cornerstone – Artic Monkeys

The bar man placed the fogged pint glass on the scarred wooden bar top, endless circles marring the once deep golden brown. It was cold inside, that particular, English winter wetness, that misted the mirror over the bar and sent tendrils of discomfort snaking around his ankles whenever the door was pushed open, which was only every few seconds. He took a drink of the bitter ale in front of him, and caught sight of her in the tarnished reflection over the bar. As always, the rest faded to sepia behind her vividness. Faces from classes and the library disappearing into a blur, and that encroaching gloom he often saw hanging over his head lifting for a moment, in the face of her light. She was laughing, unwrapping a long cream scarf from around her neck, her hair pulled away from her face, and the humid air of the pub curling the tiniest strands around her face. She settled onto the barstool next to him.

Rey.

Never far from his thoughts, her silent presence kept him company while he lingered, willing her
phantom arm to brush his, or her ghostly eyes to find him, until he eventually drained his glass, and pushed his way to the swinging door, avoiding a big group of students crowding in, exclaiming in happiness at the warmth inside. He stepped out into the bitter cold, turning the collar of his coat up, and Rey watched him go.

Staring at the sink of blood and crushed veneer

Skinny Love- Bon Iver

The man who used to be Ben Solo, tore out the door, the terrible words that had just spilt from Han’s lips had fallen like blood on the white marble of the foyer, and Ben felt the terrible fear and shame choking him seal his words inside himself, a forgotten tomb of secrets, so old it had become a piece of his soul.

He was shaking, an unfamiliar sensation, he registered as he staggered from the door in time to see his father’s car pull angrily out the courtyard and down the drive, almost clipping a security guard who was walking past. The tire marks were lost in the rain, the heavens had opened, and Ben ran after the taillights, red beacons in the darkness. The rain soaked quickly through his clothes, freezing him to the bone, and still he ran. He felt for a moment fate had sent him hurling on this path, since he’d been the little boy that love forgot. He might have tried to turn from it, but he had still ended up here.

Chasing a light in the encroaching darkness.

Gradually, the lights disappeared around a far-off bend, and still he ran. Ran through the dark, howling night, ran from his past and his pain. A gimmer of white flashed in the trees to this left and he didn’t need to glance over to see her, keeping pace with him.

Hurry Ben, faster

The sound of the crash echoed in the surrounding countryside, tires squealing, brakes failing and then, the slow roll and crush of metal and glass exploding inwards. His feet tripped on the asphalt and his momentum sent him headlong on the road. His breathed knocked from his chest, he gulped down air as blood welled along the deep cuts decorating the side of his face and hands, as the rain poured down on him. He could barely see though the deluge, could only make out the dimly white clad figure standing over him, hand outstretched.

Get up Ben. Get up now
And then, there were sirens, and a car was stopping beside him, the headlights cutting through the rain where she’d stood. She was gone, and he was alone.

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Try to kill it all away, but I remember everything

*Hurt* – *Johnny Cash*

Hux’ eyes watched as he gestured the girl forward. The remains of their debauched evening littered every surface. Empty bottles and broken glass, cigarette butts and white powder. He could see other top management engaging in some questionable activities around the room, lost in their own madness. The girl, he couldn’t remember her name now, had been watching him all evening, no doubt drawn to the same darkness that seemed to call to others to him, broken and hopeless.

Eventually, in a haze of anaesthetic, the world foggy and pain free, he held a hand out to her. The resemblance was more than passing, especially through his clouded eyes, and it would have to be more than passing for Hux to have noticed. She put her hand in his, and he leaned into the curve of her neck, breathing in deeply. Disappointment lanced through him.

“Kylo?” the girl breathed, leaning away, her voice was all wrong. He felt his heart twist with longing.

He saw her then, standing in the doorway, watching him, her beautiful face, still just 16 years old, looking sadder than he had seen in long years.

“Don’t speak” Kylo instructed quietly the girl in his arms, his fingers digging into the soft skin of her arm, hard enough to mark. Her pupils dilated and her smile widened just a touch.

Rey turned away.
"Cause I've been scared of crowded places"

Crowded Places – Banks

Her graduation gown fluttered around her legs as she stood to take her place in the queue snaking up the stairs to the stage. The tassel on her hat tickled her neck as she turned her head to the crowd. So many people, so many parents, so many friends. Everybody had someone here for them, even her. The junkie’s kid. The orphan, the outcast, the nobody.

When she strode across the stage, her step was true. She had earned this graduation, paid for in sweat and tears and she was going to enjoy it. The Principle gave her hand a slight squeeze as he handed over her diploma and she turned to the audience, and trained her eyes to the seats near the back. Jack was standing, alight with pride as he held up his phone for a picture. The seat beside him was empty for one moment, and then filled, a flickering spectre clapping just as hard as her uncle, a rare smile lighting up his face. The bright sun shone down, and she posed with a triumphant smile, as Ben raised his finger to an imaginary shutter – to remember, and she could almost hear his voice.

Rey proves them wrong

What a wicked thing to do, to make me dream of you

Wicked Game – Chris Isaak

The smell of cheap beer and body spray was almost overpowering, Rey thought, as she shifted on the squishy couch of the house. She hated these parties, but hated sitting at home alone at the same time, so here she was, watching her friends act like idiots, and sipping a luke-warm beer in a sticky cup.

She watched Finn and Rose dancing, so sweetly, despite the crush of sweating bodies. They were pressed together with honest intent, Finn’s hands holding his girlfriend of 4 years close to him, turning her now and again to avoid her being jostled or pushed. It seemed chaste compared to a drunken couple next to them that looked like they were in danger of gyrating through the wall. Yet,
It was Rose and Finn that looked suggestive to Rey. In the gentle brushes of Finn’s lips against the pink shell of Rose’ ear, in the way her fingertips smoothed tiny circles on Finn’s chest. In the tilt of their heads, both locked onto each other with an intensity that drowned out the crowd. It was intimacy, and it was just theirs.

It was in those moments, when her loneliness felt like a physical weight in her chest, and her heart filled up with longing like an ocean, the pitch and yawn dragging her endlessly to and forth, that he would come. Tonight, she saw him moving through the bodies of the frat house, an invisible reveller. He stood behind her shoulder, kept her company while she tried her best to fit in. He felt so solid and real, she almost felt the brush of his long fingers on the tendrils of hair at her nape, and then it was gone, leaving only a memory of fire.

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It’s a terrible love that I’m walking in,

It’s quiet company

Terrible Love - The National

Rey pushed the completed orders to the side and waited for the customers to take them, people searching for their names. The fall light was gentle outside the long windows, Washington Square Park full of red and golden trees and she was looking forward to getting home and watching a spooky movie with Finn, as was their Halloween tradition.

“Order up, Rey” someone said, tapping a waiting empty cup on the counter to attract her attention.

“Right, sorry” she muttered, pulling her attention back to the cup, turning it to see the ticked boxes, and then filling the espresso filters with caramel smelling ground coffee beans. She watched the dark liquid seep into the cup, before she started to add the hot water. Snapping on a lid, she carried it to the collection area and turned it in her hand, searching for the name.

Ben S

Her hand shook with the surprise of seeing that name, scrawled in real black ink against the white paper. She looked up, suddenly expecting to see him there, towering over her, his dark eyes unchanged since they day he had walked out her life. She saw his ghost shifting in the dying light, his daily vigil. All that was left, tracing her steps and dogging her thoughts, teenage Ben, unchanged after so long.

As for real people, no one came, and she stood holding the hot cup for a long time, eyes searching. Always searching. Gradually, she set the cup down on the table, and took a deep breath. Reaching out a fingertip, she rotated the cup inch by inch to see the name.
Beth S

“Beth” she called immediately, a girl rushed over, with a stirrer and sugar packet in hand.

“Sorry, for the delay” she muttered, turning back to the machine.
The lazy summer warmth of a June night wrapped around her as she stepped from the community centre and swung her bag onto her shoulder.

The smells of the city were comforting, food and fumes, as she wrapped her long hair up in a topknot, her face shiny with the sweat of her workout. She felt her phone vibrate on her pocket.

“What’s wrong, I’m almost home” she warned as she paused on the bottom of the steps to her walk up.

“There’s no food in here. Like nothing…” Finn said over the line. She signed and turned toward the parade of shops just a little further down.

“What were you thinking of?”

A little while later, she made her way up the three floor walk-up, a hot pizza box in her hands, for only a mere moment, until the door along the hall whipped open, and it was whisked away.

“You’re an angel” Finn said, disappearing inside with the pizza.

“Not that I mind, but why aren’t you at your new place?” She asked, kicking the door closed behind her, and setting her bag down. Finn was sitting on the couch, pizza box already open before him, and Catherine was lounging in her doorway. Two bedroom, third floor walk up, it was small and old fashioned, and Rey loved it. Yes, making rent every month could get a bit dicey but it was her place, and she was proud of it.

“Rose doesn’t mind… she’s at work” Finn said, his mouth already full of cheese and bread.

“Really? I thought she was off until Saturday” Rey muttered.

“Someone called in sick”

“And let me guess, they chose Rose to beg to work extra, because that girl is an actual angel and can’t say no to anybody. She should stop working there altogether, now she’d almost qualified.” Rey breathed, grabbing a piece of pizza, and offering some to her new roommate.

Catherine had just moved in, coming to city for a position in a start-up company, her last hurrah before dedicating her life to academia. The timing had been perfect for Rey, as Finn had just moved in with Rose. While she was happy to see her favourite childhood sweethearts take the next step, she missed coming home to her best friend too.

“I’m fine” Catherine murmured, before retreating to her room.

“So, how’s your gang of misguided youths coming along?” Finn asked, kicking up his feet on the coffee table, in his usual position, as Rey curled up opposite him.
“Not so differently from us, I guess, at that age”

“Yeah, but, these kids will be able to defend themselves” Finn muttered.

“I hope so” Rey said as she picked a piece of pepperoni off her slice.

“Poe’s back, at the weekend. I’m picking him at the airport”

“Wow, that went fast” Rey muttered, thinking about the last time she saw her friend, at Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris. They had just had a huge fight, and she had felt like crying, then he had kissed her on the forehead and left, unwilling to see her disappear through security.

“He asks about you” Finn said quietly.

“What do you tell him?”

“Oh the usual, that you’re the same as always, married to your work and you have no time for dating.”

“It’s the truth” Rey said. Finn studied her moment longer.

“If the right guy came along, you’d find time Rey, that’s the truth. You and Poe should just be friends, and it sucks that he feels that way about you, and has done for so long… but you don’t owe him anything. You’ve always been clear with him” Finn said, and she looked up at him, surprised.

“Rose and I talked about it” he said, colouring faintly as he turned away.

“Well, she’s a wise woman”

“Believe me, I am aware” he said with a smile and Rey felt her heart twist with longing for a moment.

“You see, you two have ruined me for life, given me these great expectations” she complained as Finn turned on the TV. Finn snorted in response.

“Please, it’s not all roses, pun intended” he said, laughing as Rey lobbed a pillow at his head.

“But seriously, relationships are hard, and there are a lot of bad parts. But if the good parts outweigh them, that’s the goal” he said.

“This is all very sage advice for someone with an orange moustache” Rey said seriously, before tucking into Finn’s side and turning to the TV.
The next morning, Rey dressed in her usual painting grab of paint splattered jeans and an old vest, pulled her hair up into a bun and sat down at her latest piece, coffee in hand.

It was coming along, the skeleton of the image was there, and she was starting to think about colour and texture, filling in and broadening out. It was already getting warm, and she had opened all the windows, enjoying the smells of frying meet and kimchi from the Korean downstairs, missed with the smell of acrylic and coffee.

It was a perfect New York morning here in Brooklyn, she thought happily, as she hoped off her stool and got to work. Catherine had left early, the only one of her friends to be working a traditional office 9-5, though at First Order Finance, it seemed more like 7-10. It seemed strange to see her suited and booted, blonde hair pulled into an elegant chignon, grey blazer crisp and professional, in their undoubtedly artsy flat. Antiques and keepsakes from travels dotted the counter tops, art, both homemade and picked up on the way decorated the walls. Rey’s bedroom itself had a mural wall, she’d painted when she’d first arrived. It was the woods by Jack’s. She’d needed something to ground her and comfort her. It didn’t matter that the tree where she’d first spoken to Ben was in it. It comforted her and made her smile.

Her cell phone rang on the counter and she groaned, seeing the name of her boss. They were going to ask her to cover someone tonight, her supposed night off. She worked as a hostess at the gentlemen’s club called Resistance. It was full of drunken business man from all over, having meetings and ordering outrageous amounts of expensive liquor. But they weren’t handsy, and the management were strict on rude customers. She didn’t like it, but she couldn’t deny the pay was essential for her to keep time to paint and volunteer. She tried to paint as much as she could, though recently she had started helping Jessika, who had taken over the reins of her uncle’s business, an interior design company, and she had taken Rey with her once to an interview. They had been booked, and the client had requested Rey’s eye for the artwork for the hallways in the palatial mansion. It wasn’t quite being the artist she wished to be one day, but it was in the art world and interesting, beside, it helped Jessika. Since then, Rey optimistically submitted some of her own pieces in her design portfolio, though she was yet to be asked about them.

Later as she munched through the sandwich she’d cobbled together, she got into her work outfit. Hostessing at the Resistance came with a standard uniform of short, formal shorts and a sleeveless blouse tucked in. She could at least be grateful the tops weren’t low cut, though the shorts probably made up for it, with the wide expanse of leg they revealed. Rey put on make up, another requirement of the job and caught her hair half up half down. It wasn’t her thing, dressing up fancy in impractical clothes, and she was pretty sure it showed. But a job was a job, she reminded herself grimly as she caught the train into the city.
Catherine Phasma watched the clock in her cubicle count down to 10pm. She was sitting casually, scrolling through work emails, and watching as one by one, cubicle lights went off, and people left for the evening. She was nervous. She didn’t want it to get too much later, it might look suspicious if she stayed in the office too far beyond 10pm. If only everyone was considerate of her timetable, she thought sourly, glancing at the glass office in the middle of the open plan work space, where harsh light emanated into the surrounding darkness, and she could see a dark head bent over spreadsheets. All the man did was work, or have secret conference calls with the CEO. Abruptly, he stood, all 6 ft 3 of him towering over his desk and cracked his neck, back and forth, his hands loosening his tie. Catherine practically gaped at his evidence that her boss, Kylo Ren, was in fact human, and not a cyborg. He stared into the darkness beyond his office and his eyes immediately fixed on her lit cubicle.

He watched a moment, as she pretended to be busy. Out the corner of her eye, she saw his light flick off. She held her breath as she clicked into an excel spreadsheet and randomly looked at the figure in it.

“Phasma. Burning the midnight oil?” he asked suddenly, emerging soundlessly from the darkness. She jumped, her nerves higher than ever.

“Yes, I just wanted to finish something for the Wolsely account” she said, cursing her dry mouth. She turned slightly and glanced up at her boss, the man who used to be called Ben Solo. He was inscrutable. He studied her in silence, his hard jaw clenched, his calculating eyes on her computer.

“Try and see to it that you manage your work load within the working day.” He finished instructed, and she nodded, a little embarrassed at the rebuke.

“Remind me, what brought a journalism major to finance? I seemed to recall your parents being teachers” he said suddenly. She was shocked he remembered her at all, never mind her parents. She was also surprised he remembered her major without her cv in front of him.

“Professors” she corrected instinctively, before shrugging.

“There’s no money in teaching” she said, hoping he would accept her weak justification. The stare went on a moment more, and just when she was about to fidget, something she never did, he nodded to her, dismissing her, settling his coal black coat over his black suit, despite the warm summer and heading toward the doors. She shivered in his absence.

There was something so creepy about Kylo Ren, she thought, thinking of the watercooler gossip she had heard about him. That he was a control freak who never showed affection or humour, or basically any other human emotion. She had heard he was estranged from his mother, and of course, there was that business with his father.

She remembered Ben Solo from high school, a loner, a misfit, violent and lonely, but then, weren’t they all. Catherine certainly had been, but she had used those feelings to push her to make some friends, get out her comfort zone. She thought of Rey, and instantly felt the same shame that had dogged her since she’d moved in with her. Rey had no idea that Catherine was working for the boy who had torn her heart in two during high school. Catherine didn’t want to stir all that up again, and anyway, as far as she was concerned, there didn’t seem to be much left of the boy Rey had cried over. It was better this way, she told herself as she slipped her elicit thumb drive out the concealed bottom of her coffee cup, and made her way to Kylo Ren’s office to get the scoop of the century.
"Don’t watch the staff, all you’ll see is the end hitting you in the face. Watch my shoulders, my eyes, see my intentions, and move to block where I will be” she said, shifting her staff slowly into an attack arch, while signalling strongly with her body her intentions.

Her staff struck another with a hollow clack, and she stepped back smiling.

“Well done! You are getting better everyday, Layla” she said, resisting the urge to reach out and ruffle the hair of the girl standing before her. Her expression as hard, already so hard for a 14 year old as she rolled her eyes sarcastically.

“Whatever you say” she said, popping more gum in her mouth, and moving to sit down against the wall. Rey knew it was a front, just like she’d had at that age, and she also knew that Layla was pleasing, there was a hint of pride in her eyes as she sat amongst the younger students, who were shooting envious looks her way.

“Ok, that’s it for today. We will pick up on Wednesday, I hope to see everyone there. If you can’t come, text me, so I know you’re ok” she called, knowing it was mostly useless, but wanting to try anyway. She wanted them to know she would be there if they really needed her, at the other of the phone, anytime.

Knights of Ren was a beat down community centre at the heart of the neighbourhood, and it just used to be a free masons venue. However, Rey had found that by volunteering at a local youth centre, there weren’t enough activities to keep the kids occupied and out of trouble at night. Not to mention, there were far too many girls, some as young as 12, who were completely vulnerable and in bad living situations.

She had started a mixed martial arts defence classes for girls, at the centre, which had plenty of hall space for hire. She had wanted the class to be mixed, but as the girls ended up not participating if there were boys around, which frustrated her, but Rey had to remind herself to take baby steps. They gave her the hall space for next to nothing, which was necessary, given she had next to nothing left over to pay with. She had about 15 regular students now, and the cause was very dear to her heart, another reason she couldn’t afford to give up her hostess job just now.

She watched the girls file out, friendships already formed amongst them, and she hoped that would help keep them safe.

“Miss?” she turned to see one of her younger students, a very shy girl waiting for her, fidgeting nervously.
“What is it Anayah?” she asked, gathering up her blocks and punching pads, transferring them into a carrying bag.

“I was wondering, when are you going to start up a boys class?” she asked tentatively.

“I don’t know, I don’t really have enough time or money to do it, why, do you know someone who wants to come?” Anayah nodded.

“My brother” she said quietly. Rey hunkered picked up her heavy bag and started for the door, holding it open for Anayah.

“How old is he?”

“16” Anayah said. Rey bit her lip. 16 was old for class, and he was a boy, meaning he’d be much stronger than the rest.

“Why do you want him to come?” she probed. Anayah looked down, at her hands, anywhere but at Rey, and spoke at length.

“He’s always getting in fights. There’s these boys, they used to be friends, they used to come over to our house sometimes, but I guess they fell out, and now Mikey doesn’t like them anymore. Sometimes he just comes home and goes straight to his room, he doesn’t speak to any of us, not like mama tries anyway, and later when I go in there, he’s been... bleeding” Anayah said, with a worried note in her voice. Rey rested her hand on the young girls’ shoulder.

“I’m sorry, it’s hard, being a teenager, sometimes it’s really hard. I’ll tell you what, bring Mikey by on Friday, he can see what he thinks and we’ll see what the other girls say” Rey said, and was rewarded with a bright smile appearing on Anayah’s pinched little face.

“Here, no one finished these” she said, passing the bag of orange slices to Anayah, who took them a little too quickly.

The next evening, Rey was gulping down a quick glass of wine before her friends arrived at the pub they were meeting for dinner at. It wasn’t that she was nervous to see him, just that she might need a little liquid courage to make the conversation run smoothly.

“Starting without us, I see” Poe’s warm voice brushed her ear as he leaned into her from behind and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. She felt her cheeks scorch red, as she slid further into the booth and gave him a smile.

“Hello, sunshine” he said with a grin. He looked good, tan and lithe, all dark stubble and flashing white teeth. Then he was sliding into the booth, pulling her close for a long hug, apparently
deciding that just a kiss on the cheek wasn’t enough. He smelled great, she knew it on every level. He leaned away, leaving his warm palm warming her spine as his eyes fairly twinkled into hers.

“Happy to see me? Or… not really, after Paris” he asked softly, tipping his head to the side. Rey shook her head adamantly.

“Of course, happy, I’m always happy to see you.” She said. Poe watched her, not missing the way she couldn’t hold his gaze for too long, or the tremor in her fingers.

“Rey, I did a lot of thinking once you’d left Paris, and I just think we are going about this all wrong. I’m sorry I pressured you, it wasn’t my intention. I never want you to feel uncomfortable with me. Ever” he said, taking her hand and pressing a kiss onto the back.

Rey gulped, afraid that Finn’s reasonable advice didn’t seem to have taken with his best friend. She was thankfully saved from having to answer by a loud shriek she recognised as Jess’s, and turned to see Jess, Rose and Finn approaching. She didn’t see how Poe caught her thankful expression, his own turning a little pensive even as he turned to greet his friends.

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Rey ate sparingly, listening to the conversation flowing around her. It was hard to see Poe and hear him talk about Paris without feeling all the confusion and shame she associated with it, since she’d last seen him.

6 years ago, Rey had never gone to prom with Poe. The night she had gotten home from Ben’s graduation, she had gone to bed, and stayed there for several days. She couldn’t eat or drink, and Jack had only prised her out by threatening to go to the Solo’s and demanding answers from Ben himself.

So, Rey had dusted herself off, and put on a happy face, well happy enough for her, and trudged on. She’d feigned illness as an excuse for prom, and afterwards, she had never really told her Insorito friends about Ben. Surprisingly, Catherine Phasma had been the only one she’d told, when she’d run into her at the library during a scorching summer where she had looked for Ben around every corner with equal parts longing and horror. Only Phasma had known Ben, and she told her, when pressed. She had agonised wondering if he had left already, and had slowly started to accept that she’d never know. She wasn’t part of his life anymore. The pain of that realisation had taken a long time to develop, and then, when it was at full bloom, it had last a long time too, as did its slow ebbing.

Rey was someone who had been disappointed by people she’d loved, her mother and absentee father laying the path for the dysfunctional way she would form attachments afterwards. When she had met Ben, her soul had met its match, and her heart had latched on, without realising that there were two people in that equation. Ben hadn’t wanted what she’d offered him. She’d had nothing to offer him, except herself, and he hadn’t wanted it. The trauma of that had stayed with her. It had affected her in ways she could barely recognised, so far-reaching were they.

The main one, and the one she planned to start therapy for as soon as she could afford it, was her sex life, or lack thereof.

In college, Rey had drank and partied with the same reckless abandon that her peers had. She had kissed guys in bars and at parties, sometimes even letting them get below her clothes, but always
seemed to sober enough to realise that her body was unresponsive. She had gone on dates sparingly, too invested in her studies and working part time to make ends meet. Jack had given her many gifts, a real home for one, someone to love her, a father figure, and her college education was just one of them. Toward the time for applying for college, Jack had sat her down at the scarred kitchen table in the cottage and asked what her plans were.

“I don’t have any plans. I haven’t really thought that far ahead” Rey had muttered, not saying that the subject was particularly difficult for her, and do almost anything to avoid it.

“Well, I’m told it’s time to get going with all that”

“Told by whom?” she’d asked accusingly.

“Finn. Who told me that Rose told him to call, so I know it’s true” Jack had said, before reaching out and pulling a bank book from his pocket.

“Now, I now it won’t cover everything, but it’s not too late to apply for a scholarship, and I’m afraid you’ll have to work, for living money and that, but I know you’re not afraid of hard graft… but it’s a start” he had mumbled, seeming embarrassed about the whole situation. Rey had taken the little book in her hands and stared numbly at the amount in the savings, and then noting the name near the top of the page.

“It’s your money Rey, everything left over from your mothers – passing, and I had savings, being a bachelor my whole life, and I’ve added everything I could over the years.”

“Jack, its more than a start – I can’t take this, this is yours, and you should use it to do something you want to do…”

“What I want is for you to go to college. First in the family, my girl – that’s what I want, if you want to” Rey had felt a tear run down her cheek at his soft proud words.

And so, Rey had gone to college, close enough to still visit Jack every month, because that mattered more to her than the fear of running into Ben in the city.

Her time at NYU had changed her. Challenged her and scared her and pushed her. She had loved every second of it, her terrible stats at dating notwithstanding.

She had seen Poe during it, as he was studying the same as Phasma, Journalism. He’d gotten a serious girlfriend the very first week of classes, and that had lasted a long time, several years in fact. It wasn’t until the last year of school, when they’d been celebrating Independence Day, that Poe had kissed Rey for the first time.

She remembered it like it was yesterday. She’d only had a handful of meaningful kisses to treasure, and more than half of them belonged to someone it still hurt to think about. Poe’s kiss, on the roof top of Rose’ dorm, watching July fourth fireworks, while Finn burned the hotdogs, and she had a warm, cheap beer bottle hanging from her fingertips, watching the coloured lights appear over the city she was falling in love with again, was something to be remembered. He had been leaning
against the railing with her, his arm casually brushing hers with increasingly frequency, and then, it had been slipping around her and pulling her close into his side. She’d turned to him with a smile, ready to tease him, when his lips had met hers. They had kissed for only a short moment, sweet and chaste, and she had leaned away to see his sincere eyes holding hers.

“I very much want to do that again, if I can” he’d murmured, and she’d nodded, half dazed and surprised. And so, he had kissed her again, stronger, sweeter, until Finn’s catcall had broken the moment, and Poe had pretended to throw his bottle at him.

That night he’d walked her home, tentatively holding her hand, and kissed her again outside her apartment.

“Poe, I’m flattered, I really am…”

“Don’t Rey, don’t say what you’re just about to”

“I just-” she let out a long breath, shoulders rounding in defeat.

“I’m just not girlfriend material”

“Hey, you take that back, that’s my friend you’re talking about” Poe had threatened before pulling her back into a lingering kiss.

“Sunshine, you couldn’t be more wrong about that, but its ok, I’ll show you”

They had seen each other for dates separately from then a few times, nothing too serious, Poe seeming to know instinctively that it was hard for Rey. She never told him why she shied away from greater intimacy.

Rey knew though. She stared at her naked body, and felt there nothing there to appreciate, nothing she wanted to share. She had shown it to someone she had loved, and he hadn’t wanted it. She knew it was a simplistic interpretation of events, and knew she should be better than that, but she wasn’t.

She had told Rose some of it, Rose, who was putting her huge brain to good use and becoming a physiatrist. Rose had talked to her about it at length, well, made Rey do most of the talking. She had reasoned, at length, that what had happened with Ben had actually traumatised her, which seemed odd, after all she’d been through before. Rose suggested that maybe, just maybe, she hadn’t really processed all the changes that had happened to her in that year she’d met Ben. Losing her mother, her neighbourhood, the odd collection of constants she’d had, meagre as they’d been, and moving to Jacks, a new school, new town. All that fear and change and loss had coalesced around Ben, someone who Rey had identified with, had felt understood by, and had put an inappropriate amount of emotion into what essentially was only about a year long friendship. Maybe she had projected things onto Ben, given him a role to fill, responsibilities to hold over her, that he wasn’t emotionally equipped for himself.

Yes, he had rejected her harshly, but through Rose’ eyes, she had finally started to see that maybe there had been a kindness there, underneath everything else. Would sleeping with Ben, someone she was helplessly in love with, in some strange twisted scene in which she played the sacrificial virgin, laid on the alter of his needs, and nothing for her but his presence, would it have been something she’d have regretted, even more than his harsh rejection? She could never know, but
she did start to understand that she had been messed up long before she met Ben Solo, and even now, with her difficulty with intimacy, may well had been created in that pressure cooker of teenage hormones, first love and unresolved feelings of loss and abandonment issues.

She thought all these things when she was feeling kind. Kind to past Ben and past teenage Rey, who were both just messed up kids who’d hurt each other and made mistakes. So, as an adult, she was a virgin, and not one who was particularly in a hurry about becoming intimate with someone, maybe she never would. Not everyone was sexual, and, given her mothers past, who even knows what other issues Rey harboured deep in her psyche.

In her harsher, less kind moments, she hated that boy with the flashing eyes and the seldom smile with a deep intensity that whispered of unresolved love and hated herself for allowing him in so far in the first place. She’d had no walls, when she’d met Ben, not against his brand of brokenness. And he had stormed in and taken the fortress of her heart, only to abandon it later, once it had been wrecked.

Poe’s hand brushed hers as she reached for another sip of her wine. The contact brought her back to Paris, and a hotel room nestled in the 18th Arrondissement, surrounded by snow dusted streets.

Her bag fell with a hard jangle in the silence of the room, as Rey walked backwards, with Poe slipping his hands around her waist. The wine at dinner swam through her veins, as he kissed her neck, and she let her yes fall closed. She could so this, it felt good, and safe, and she wanted so very much to be the girl who would let a sweet, kind man make love to her in the most romantic city in the world. Paris dripped sex, from the food and art to the Parisian couples in the restaurant they had eaten in, chicly brazen in their desire for each other.

Poe’s mouth moved to her shoulder, and he was pushing the straps of her dress down. Rey sucked her stomach in, as he laid his hand on her belly. She deliberated where to put her hands on him, and settled for resting them on his shoulders.

“Rey, are you sure?’ he was breathing, rough and urgent against her neck.

“Yes, I’m sure, please” she’d replied, ignoring that swimming feeling moving to her head, not as relaxing as she’d thought it would be. His hands were pulling away her bra, and she fought the urge to cover herself, and felt his mouth move down. His lips were soft, and as she tried to sink into the sensations, she heard herself whimper.

“Harder” she whispered, twisting his hair sharply to try and chase after the ghostly touch of lust, so fleeting, it was as though she’d imagined it. He made an encouraging noise, unperturbed by her demands. His soft lips continued to kiss her, gentle as a petal fall, and frustration built in her for a moment. She pulled his head away, and spun around, leaning her back against him, and reached up, directing his head to her neck, and she felt his lips move against her skin and pulled her hands to cup her breasts. Again, she reached for something, harder, sharper, more...

She walked to the bed and sat down, pulling her skirt out the way, she reached her hand out for Poe, who stood looking at her with an ego inflating look of awe.

“Rey, you’re breathtaking” he said, and then the wine was making her head spin again, and his voice was wrong, too soft, too gentle. She held her hand out to him, and tugged him down to cover her. He kissed her, and she pushed herself into it, rolling her hips under him, trying to achieve some kind of friction. He moaned on top of her, and she felt the disparity between their experiences, but the ambition to overcome this block of hers pushed her on. He kissed her slowly,
his hands touching her all over, and she tried, she really tried to feel something at his touch. She cared for him so much, he was an amazing man, and when he smiled at her, she felt all sorts of excitement, but here, underneath him, all she felt was trapped, and that feeling was starting to make her feel desperate.

She grabbed his hand, and pushed his fingers under the waistband of her panties. They both stilled, as his fingers froze. Then, he gently stroked her. It felt… nice, she supposed. He stroked again, and she couldn’t help but grab his hand, and increasing the pressure, the urgency.

“Put it inside me” she asked, trying very much to get them where she wanted to go. He tried then, and she gasped as the intrusion, as gentle as it had been, scraped against her dry flesh. He tried again, slipping his fingers into his mouth first to wet them, but they only succeeded into getting about an inch into the taut arid flesh.

“It’s ok, it’s normal for the first time, we just need to-“ he was saying as Rey felt the last urge to try and feint desire flee. She flopped back, pulling his hand out and clapped a hand over eyes. Poe was hesitating beside her, and she felt more awful than ever.

“Rey, it’s my fault, I need to warm you up more” he said saying, his hand moving toward her breast again, and she felt for a second that if he touched her again, she’d turn to stone.

“Stop, please… stop” she muttered, and he stilled immediately. She knew he was right of course, understood the mechanics, however, what he didn’t know was that she didn’t feel anything, she was cold and unmoved by all it, and his hands on her body were threatening to make her cry.

“I’m sorry, it’s not you. It’s me. I’m broken inside” she said, turning to curl on her side, and giving into the tears that wouldn’t be held back any longer. She could feel Poe’s pain, and it made it all the worse.

“Rey” he sounded so despondent, so worried for her and she hated herself even more.

“I told you, I’m not girlfriend material” she’d sniffed, turning her face into the pillow, and curling up in ball. She wanted to tell him not to touch her, not to care, because it was all just making it worse, but instead, she couldn’t strangle the wrenching sobs ripping from her chest.

“I don’t know what to do” he had finally admitted, rubbing his face in his hands. She couldn’t pull herself out of her downward spiral, couldn’t break through the shame and embarrassment that lay thick in the air.

“I don’t want to leave you, but I don’t know if I’m making it better…”

“Nothing can make it better, just… go, it’ll be better if you go”
Thanks again for the support all! I'll try to answer comments, but am pressed for time (life + writing - incompatible), so probably won't be able to keep up current posting frequency, but will try.

I really hope you enjoy the chapter... a bit backstory heavy, but I feel like there are 6 years missing, and a lot of Rey's current attitude and motivations come from that time. I hope it's not too dry, and history heavy.. and no Reylo ((( sorry.... next time I promise.

Anyway, current times Kylo and Rey and their story is a bit complicated, but if I can pull it off, I think it'll be good!

Let me know what you think of adult Rey and Kylo.
See I was dead when I woke up this morning

Rey and Jessika struggled from the cab on the Upper West side, hauling unwieldy concept boards from the boot. She’d worn her most office appropriate clothes, but was well aware that both her and Jessika stood out in the morning crowd, mostly dressed in greys and blacks. Jessika had gone for a full on teal suit, with a black shirt, button to the neck and a slash of red lipstick, that matched her shoes. It was fashionable and arty, and Rey loved it. She had never owned a suit of any kind, and instead had on a high-waisted tube skirt, a long sheath of pastel coloured, paint spatters, scuba material, that hugged her body to her knees, and made going up and down stairs a little difficult. On top, a chiffon, cream wrap around top with bell sleeves, romantic and modern clashing together. Her hair, she’d left down, and her make up as simple and natural, as usual, but with a rosy lipstick to pick up a colour in her skirt. She had forced her feet into nude heels on the subway, a rare occurrence, her flats tucked away in her bag and she’d rather optimistically brought a dove grey tailored blazer, but the day’s heat was already making it out of the question.

They were pitching to a new client for a corporate bid, a direction Jessika was determined to take her uncle’s company in. After seeing pictures of the space, this was the first meeting, along with other bidders. If this one was successful, they’d come back with more detailed plans. It was a lot more formal than their usual pitches, and Rey found herself feeling a little nervous as they navigated to a faceless glass monolith, by the power of Jessika’s phone, and struggled through the revolving door with the awkward story boards. People looked.

“Just act confident” Jessika whispered as they strode to the security desk, and then lifts, heading for the 17th floor.

“What kind of company is this again?” Rey asked, as they walked the plush carpet, the sound of silence emanating from large open plan rooms on either side, where people worked away furiously.

“I thought you read the brief”

“Of course, I read it, investment hedging, or trust funding something”

“That’s not a thing” Jessika hissed as a receptionist directed them toward a conference room.

The whole room was shiny and sleek, and they quickly found everything they needed to set up.

“Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee…”

“Water would be great” Rey asked, as she looked around the cavernous space.

Rey struggled with the projector screen as the lady came back, baring a large jug of water and three glasses.

“Well, I can see why they need help. This office is boring as –“

“Rey!” Jessika’s panicked whisper froze the words in her throat, and she heard the sound of someone entering the room. Straightening up from her bent position, sorting the damned story boards, she turned, plastering her most solicitous smile onto her face, which did not come naturally, but she thought it was a pretty good version.

“Please, don’t stop on my account. Boring as -?”

“Oh, hell” she muttered.
Standing there, with a nasty smirk already pained across his porcelain face, topped with the same, distinctive fiery red hair was someone she really had hoped to never see again.

Armitage Hux.

“Boring as-“ Hux prompted and she wondered for a moment if he was teasing her.

“Anything?” she finished hopefully, getting nothing but in incline of his head to the chairs by the desk, as he moved around the other side. Jessika silently screamed at her behind his back while Rey twisted her face in an apology, before they both ended their abrupt, silent conversation as Hux sat and faced them. She flinched as his scathing eyes trailed up her, judging. She thought about getting up right then and telling him to go to hell, seeing as it was unlikely he would employ her, but couldn’t face giving Hux the satisfaction of causing a scene.

“Mr Hux, thank you so much for inviting us to present our ideas for this wonderful space” Jessika was saying. He was looking at Jessika, listening respectfully, the only sign of movement was the tapping of his fingers on his leg, but his smarmy satisfaction as rolling off him in waves.

“We have some ideas to get your thoughts on” Jessika was saying, nudging Rey to get up and turn over the concept boards. She shot to her feet and moved to the stand they’d set up. Jessika talked through each one, and Rey tried not to feel embarrassed at the feeling that Hux’s eyes were more on her than the boards beside her. He stood abruptly, after they’d finished and stalked around the desk. He was looking carefully at concept three, her favourite.

“This is really great for lightening up spaces, creating a more natural ambiance” Jessika was saying as Hux moved closer, his eyes lingering on the canvas, a slight frown marring the space between his eyes.

“I noted that you have considerably less experience than the other portfolios submitted.” He sniffed at length, looking down his nose at their offering, turning back and sitting down.

“Yes, we do, we are just moving into the corporate arena, we have a more established presence in home design”

“And you think that would translate easily into office space?” he asked, his tone making it clear he didn’t agree.

“And what do you do?” he asked suddenly, turning his contemptuous gaze to Rey.

“Rey is a creative consultant, as well as helping with the selection process of pieces” Jessika rushed to say.

“Mr Ren is not an easy man to please, what makes you think you’d be able to understand his vision for this office?” he asked, scrutinising Rey carefully, and she had the impression of undercurrents that she couldn’t grasp.

“We work closely with the company to ensure it is exactly what was envisaged” Jessika was saying, keeping her cool admirably, even as Rey and Hux stared each other down.

“What I envisage is not having to worry about any valuables going missing, from sticky fingers” Hux said suddenly, and Rey felt herself flush slightly.

“And I would envisage working in a place without the threat of assault” she snapped back, and strangely, Hux was the one who looked away first.
“Erm, I’m sorry, I think I missed something in the introductions. Do you know each other?”

“No” Rey snapped at the same time as Hux grunted,

“Yes”

“Not really” Rey clarified as she pulled the concept board from the stand and stood stiffly to Jessika’s side.

“I think that’s everything” she said, ignoring Jessika’s look of alarm at her rudeness. Hux watched her steadily.

“I think it is. Sticky fingers or not, maybe Pava designs might be exactly what we need to shake things up around here.” He said, and Rey was suddenly sure he didn’t mean for interior design reasons.

“I can assure you that our employees are completely trustworthy” Jessika was saying as she followed Hux to the door to the meeting room. Rey trudged after them, and squeezed past his figure in the doorway.

“I’ll pass on your regards” he said with a hateful smile. She frowned slightly at that, wondering who he could be talking about, and why she’d care.

“Knock yourself out, Hux. Please” she muttered as Jessika picked up the other end of the board and started toward the elevators. Rey could feel Hux’ hateful eyes on her and it made her skin crawl.

Well, there goes that job, she thought mournfully as they made their way to the raised level overlooking the lobby. Even if Hux somehow decided to give them the contract, it would probably only be out of spite, and he was looking to torment her for a month. What bad luck, she mused as she stepped carefully onto the moving escalator, finding her balance, while holding the long boards a little difficult. She could see Jessika wobbling ahead of her, and stifled a giggle at the first impression they would make if they both fell to a spectacular end at the bottom of the stairs, boards broken, a pitiable heap. Hux would probably love that, play it on a loop over the massive screens that dominated one wall of the lobby.

It was then that Rey, had she been able to see herself from outside, would have recognised the signs that another turning point was about to occur in her life. Another pivot point, from which her future would spin out in new, unexpected directions, and she would have to choose between these new shiny red threads, and lose the other paths in the process.

She was aware of the sun, beating down through the high windows of the lobby, a bright strand of it working its way across her face. The smooth motion of the long escalator, and her tight grip on the concept boards, swaying slightly from Jessika’s shared hold.

She glanced down at the opposing escalator, moving slowly past, the people of the First Order heading into work, a sea of navy, grey and white workwear.

And then, a spectre in black.

He was a vacuum in the space of the light around him, sucking her eyes to him, drawn by some invisible force.

Ben
Her eyes locked onto him, as a roaring started in her ears. He was so tall, was her first thought.

He was so different, was the next. His features, the long nose and defined jaw, sculpted cheeks and lips that were too soft, always an awkward jigsaw of too distinctive parts pushed together and arranged sparingly, had suddenly slotted into place. Gone was the teenage skin, replaced by pale velvet, marked only by a constellation of beauty spots. His hair, long as always, but without the patina of teenage hormones, was a shining, mane of deepest brown waves, sitting back regally off his high forehead.

Even in the same moment as seeing all the differences, she saw the similarities, the long lashes, far too long for a boy, those elegant winged brows, framing eyes that were too knowing.

Her heart was pounding irregularly, sweat breaking out on her palms, the boards slipping a fraction in her grasp.

He was looking down at his phone, a frown marking his brow, a dark intensity focused with all its might on the small screen, and Rey became aware of a sort of panic building. They were about to pass each other.

Suddenly, he clicked off his phone, his movements sharp and efficient, and looked up.

Straight at her.

It was like lighting had struck her as his eyes met hers. She knew she was staring in disbelief, could feel that her mouth was open with surprise, but was incapable of doing anything but gaping like a fish.

He looked right at her, and the jolt of his eyes on hers brought her voice back.

“Ben?” she said quietly, the name almost alien on her lips after so long.

And just like that, they had passed each other, and she was faced with other people on the stairs, that patch of sunlight finally hitting her eyes, and she closed them for a moment gratefully. The whole thing had lasted less than a minute, and yet, she felt like a different person than the one who had stepped onto the escalator.

He hadn’t looked surprised, she realised. His face had been impassive, accepting and sort of… empty, she thought when she thought back to his expression.

“Rey!” Jessika called as Rey stumbled off the escalator behind her, gracelessly.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine” she muttered, a mantra to herself. Jessika tugged the concept boards and she was pulled along with it. They crossed the lobby at speed and Rey felt as though her heart was moving in the opposite direction. A security guard opened a large door to help them out, and she felt as though a piercing weight was resting on her neck.

She twisted around, with great difficultly as Jess had not stopped moving, and glanced back as well she could. Her eyes moved quickly over the lobby, and then rose to the top of the escalator. The last glimpse she had was him standing between the two escalators, arms braced on the banister of the upper level, staring down at her. A dark knight standing in a glass and steel keep, she found herself thinking, fancifully. But there was something about the dense black suit, a cut that was vaguely reminiscent of a gi, as well as his guarded expression, one of intensity and dark intent, as though Ben’s shadow had taken his place and wore his face.

Then they were on the street, the heat rushing in, as well as the cacophony of city noises. Rey
trailed after Jessika, numbed. She thought she might be in shock, but couldn’t really say why. So, she had seen him, perhaps she had been waiting for it the whole time she’d been in New York, dreading it and longing for it in equal measure, and now it had happened, and the world had not stopped moving. Everything was the same, except her lungs felt as though they’d been punctured, air slowly leaking out. Had he even recognised her? Did he even remember her? The thought broke open a scar on her heart that she had thought healed, one with his name on it. She pushed it from her mind, along with the whole encounter for just now, as Jessika flagged down a taxi, and they put the boards in the boot. She’d think about it later, she could handle it later, she promised herself.

Kylo Ren looked over the reports on his desk, as Hux took an opportunity to look around his spartan office.

“What’s the point in being the boss, if you don’t even stamp your personality anywhere in the office” he sneered, as Kylo flicked through lab results, going back to check on something, a tiny voice at the back of his mind telling him something was wrong.

“Didn’t you hear, this is my personality” he said flatly, and knew by Hux’ reaction that his dead eyes did indeed mirror the minimal utilitarian office.

“Leave this with me, I have too much to do to spend any time on it”

“Snoke doesn’t need you to spend time on it, he just needs your signature, like always, to push it through” Hux complained. Kylo sat back and stared at him, a long unflinching menace boiling in his gaze.

“I want to see the remodel bids” he said finally, changing the subject and satisfied with seeing Hux flinch. His small blue eyes shot to Kylo’s, and confirmed his bosses suspicions.

“That’s my project” he demurred.

“And now it’s mine.” Kylo said as he indicated to the door with an incline of the head, a clear dismissal. Hux hesitated further.

“What?” Kylo practically barked, his limited store of patience with the man running dry.

“I – I’ve already started the process. It’s not professional to just- “ Hux said haltingly and jumped a little when Kylo slammed the file down on his desk and sat forward, a sudden burst of movement after his stillness, unsettling the slighter man.
“Do not mistake my tolerating your presence here as my forgetting my opinion of you. It hasn’t changed. Send me the bids, and get out” Kylo reminded him, and purposefully turned his back on his most hated subordinate. Hux strode out, bristling with the slight, and Kylo relaxed infinitesimally as the door softly clicked behind him.

He was on edge. He had been one edge since seeing her.

Rey.

It had been a normal morning, nothing out of the ordinary, he went about his business with his usual numbness. Her memory always accompanied him, so it was no surprise to see her on the escalator, moving slowly toward him, or even her soft voice.

But then, as he had looked at her, he had realised with a start, that the woman before him was not a 6-year-old memory of Rey.

This Rey was a woman, breathtaking and heart-breaking all at once. Her face, always holding the perfect beauty of a rose bud, literally stole his breath away, the promise of her beauty fully realised. She had been tanned, her hair down. He had rarely see it down, and it shone in the sunlight, stands of brown and caramel brushing the tops of her shoulders. Her body, taller than he remembered, a taped waist and slim shoulders passed mere inches from his, and he felt a tug in his chest, strange and unfamiliar. His heart, so long neglected, he had forgotten what it felt like to beat.

She was real, the realisation was a lightning bolt, he could practically feel energy sparking off him as he reached the top of the stairs, and went to the banister, pushing others out the way to wrap his hands around the cold, hard metal, searching for something to ground him, a strange paralysis coming over him as his eyes searched for her. It was the moment he had waited an eternity for, and feared in equal measure.

A living flame, dancing across the monotone lobby, he found her instantly. She seemed to burn, he watched her walking, and willed her to turn.

When she did, he felt it again in his chest, a strangled thump, irregular and so painful he struggled to breath for a moment. And then, she was gone, and it hurt even more.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d stayed in the same spot, but when he’d eventually turned away, his mask was back in place, the one that his employees expected him to wear. The one that cleared the corridor in front of him, and made people get off the lift at the wrong floor for, just to avoid the frigid atmosphere around him. The man without a heart. Striding to the reception, he had quelled the urge to rush after her, to chase her down in the street, sure she’d already gone, and also sure he would lose all semblance of dignity in his current state of agitation.

“I want to see the visitor logs” Kylo Ren’d commanded, in the tone that had earned him his fiercesome reputation. He waited impatiently as the nervous receptionist fumbled with a clipboard, dropping it twice before handing it into his grasp. He scanned down the names, his finger moving over them, until stopping.

“Jessika Pava and Rey Nessuno – Pava Interiors”

It was a test, his first true one, since his father. He shied away from that thought and turned to more pleasant thoughts of Rey, and how she had surpassed even his wildest, most private
imaginings. He thought he had risen above such attachments, thought he would be unmoved by her, after so long living as he had, and yet, he felt unmanned, admitting it to himself. Something had surged in his chest at the sight of her, something foul and naïve, something he had long suppressed and thought snuffed out for good. Hope.

It was only because it was someone from his past, he told himself. It was a link, and Snoke had warned him against anything or anyone from before, as they would cause him to doubt. Though, this went back further than finally seeing her, he had to admit. Rey, the weakness he could never quite rid himself of, his longing for her. Why else had he hired Catherine? It certainly wasn’t for her non-related degree, though she was smart as whip and adaptable to any kind of work.

He had been looking for her, in any connection to the past he could justify. Why he couldn’t just admit it to himself and hire a private investigator and hunt her down, he still wasn’t sure. Was he still the man who would push her away for her own good? He didn’t think he was anymore. If she had less effect on him, he would bind her to his side for his own pleasure and care not about the effect on her. Maybe he was afraid to press too hard on that weakness, that tender spot that he still harboured for the little scavenger, who had climbed into his heart before he’s lost his soul. The part of his heart that hadn’t died quite yet.

He pushed himself back from his glass and steel table and approached the window, a floor length drop to the lazy summer sun slowly sinking over Central Park. He remembered looking at the view beside Rey, her excitement and his own too. Of all the foolish and naïve dreams of his youth, the ones involving her, hurt the most. He caught sight of his own hated expression in the glass. His unseeing eyes and cool expression. Sometimes he didn’t recognise himself in the mirror anymore, and wondered who this man was that wore his face. All great men are alone. Snoke’s voice whispered in his memory, a constant presence.

A soft knock sounded, and turned to see Phasma entering, holding a pile of folders.

“I brought the remodel bids” she said curtly. He admired that about her.

“Leave them on my desk” he instructed, turning back to the window. He stared out at the cars moving slowly along 86th street, before a shuffle alerted him to the fact that Phasma had not left yet.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, moving away from the window and coming back to his desk.

“No, sorry, just dropped some” she said, flushing a little, before making excuses and leaving. Kylo stared at her exiting back. He looked down at his desk, studying the things that he remembered being there before the colourful portfolios, with their stapled bids on top, had been placed down. There was only the chemical analysis report, nothing of importance.

He pulled the bids closer to him, as he opened them randomly, searching for something of her.

He was flipping randomly when he came to it. It was hidden toward the back of one of the better portfolios. The painting was of nature, and something about the quality of light shining through the tree canopy sent him hurtling back in time.

6 years earlier

Rey stuck unused paint brushes and pencils anywhere she could easily access them, through her buns, marching up the back of her head, between her teeth, anywhere really. She then promptly
forgot about them and had to take another from the stained mason jar off to the side, and then add them to her collection too.

He watched her fascinating process for far too long, happy to have a chance to observe her when she didn’t know she was being watched. Yes, indeed, since meeting Rey, he could add creepy obsessive stalker behaviour to violent, aggressive and loner, the never-ending list of derogatory adjectives that could be applied to him.

Finally, he cleared his throat and made his presence known. She spared him only a sideways glance, and he wondered for a moment if she had known he was there all along. Rey seemed to always know when he was near, or maybe her childhood had developed in her a super charged vigilance, he wasn’t sure. He looked at the canvas over her shoulder, instantly arrested by the pastoral scene he saw there. It was so much older than her years, it was studied and deep and wise. It was a city, but the scene made it look like a fresh and beautiful country scene, the people charming characters going about their day, and not the usual mishmash of weirdos who he always seemed to meet in New York. It was the light, he decided. It was clear and warm, and it transformed those it fell on, made them more somehow.

“Don’t say a word. I told you that this was off limits, and now, you don’t get to speak” he looked down, surprised by her hard tone, and saw a brittle fragility in her eyes. She was nervous.

“Come on kid, don’t be nervous, this is great, really great”

“Don’t humour me Ben, and don’t call me kid!”

He flipped through the rest of the portfolio and found another painting, toward the very back, this one you could almost make out initials scrawled, R.N. He summoned his secretary into the room immediately.

“This one, this is the one” he said, pushing forward the bid, realising belatedly that he hadn’t glanced at the price.

“Set up a meeting.” He instructed, his mind already leaping ahead to picture something too tantalising to resist.

Rey sitting on the other side of his desk. He swallowed hard. For someone who was supposed to be distancing himself from attachments and feelings, he was rushing headlong into dangerous territory, and yet, he swore, he could feel his heart beating for the first time in years, feel the blood pumping through his veins, felt his body alive. It felt like waking up.
She thought about him the whole way home, walking along the tree lined streets of her
neighbourhood. She thought about him in the three flights of stairs of her walk up. She thought
about him when Finn surprised her with Chinese takeout and Rose came over. They watched TV
and Rey thought about Ben. When Poe called about a party, she thought about him as she got
dressed. She was still thinking about him when a tray came around with shots, and she down 2 in
quick succession.

After fading to a sepia memory, a ghost that accompanied her at times, well worn and torn at the
edges, the real Ben had jumped back into her head with an alarming vibrancy. She couldn't stop
going over the encounter.

She thought about him as she drank and drank, unable to chase the away the storm of emotions
brewing in the pit of her stomach.

Later, as she lay on the cold tile of the bathroom, Finn rubbing warm circles on her back and her
stomach rebelled yet again, she decided to stop thinking about him.
Jessika Pava had been in some uncomfortable work situations before. A client unhappy with the finished result, or something irreplaceable damaged by a careless mover, but nothing quite compared to the chill in the air when she entered the office of Kylo Ren, President of First Order Finance, as he held the door open for a touch longer than necessary, his dark eyes on the empty corridor behind her.

At length, he let the heavy glass door swing shut, and turned abruptly, motioning her to the uncomfortable looking leather chair in front of his desk.

“Miss Pava, I assume?” he said briskly. She nodded, pasting a pleasant smile, despite his chilly reception, and held her hand out over the desk.

“Yes, please, call me Jessika. Pleasure to meet you”

“Likewise” he said, picking up her portfolio from his desk, and she quickly retracted her hand.

“So, tell me a little about your portfolio” he said, his eyes flashing to her, and felt the weight of that heavy stare. She flustered her way through her usual spiel, warming up toward the end and hitting her stride. He flipped through the pictures of finished projects and traced a large, bluntly tipped finger over one of Rey’s original paintings.

When she had come to the end of her usual speech, she sat back, picking up the glass of water near her and wetting her mouth, suddenly dry beyond belief.

“Do you work alone?”

“No, I have a team of people who specialise in different aspects of the design” she said, cutting off quickly when he interrupted.

“There were two of you at the original pitch, is that not so?”
“Yes, there was my colleague, who works in a consulting capacity” Jessika rushed to explain. Kylo Ren sat back, his impressive height intimating even behind a desk.

“And may I ask why she isn’t in attendance today? I am a busy man, I can assure you, Miss Pava” he said, and Jessika felt herself flush, as though rebuked.

“I understand completely, I felt that for this follow up meeting, it would suffice to be myself at the meeting. My colleague, Rey, she only consults on projects at certain points” she explained, and couldn’t tear her eyes away from the granite expression on the man in front of her. She had no idea what he was thinking, except for a minute ticking of a muscle in his jaw.

“I see. Well, if First Order wouldn’t be a priority for Pava Interiors and its employees, it is probably best to part ways now” he said matter-of-factly and Jessika cursed herself for not asking Rey to come along. After the weird interplay between her and Hux, and Rey’s take on his character, an old school enemy, she had thought it would go more smoothly without her. She’d had no idea they wouldn’t be meeting Hux again, never mind that she would be meeting with the president of the company himself.

“I can assure you, First Order would be our top priority”

“Even with the unsociable hours that the work may need to be done at? When we have clients in the office, it wouldn’t do to have work going on”

“Of course, it would be my full-time occupation” Kylo Ren stopped then, frowning at her, and she felt nervous all over again.

“And your consultant, it wouldn’t be her full-time occupation?”

“Not exactly, though I am sure she’d take it over a shift at Resistance any time” Jessika continued, started to feel rattled, forgetting herself in a rush to reassure this unreadable man. He seemed determined to find fault with the company, and everyone’s time commitment, for some reason, and she was starting to feel frazzled.

“Thank you, Miss Pava. This has been very informative.” The taciturn man opposite her said suddenly, and stood up. Jessika blinked at the abruptness of his movement and then followed slowly, feeling sure she was being dismissed from the position. He hadn’t been happy with her answers or the meeting in general it seemed. Kylo Ren walked to the door and pulled it open, and Jessika drifted to it in a daze.

“Congratulations. I am happy to tell you that I have selected Pava Interiors. The accounting department will be in touch to organise the up front, and we can get started.” He said, and she looked up at him in surprise.

“Next time though, Miss Pava, I really must insist on your consultant attending important meetings, as I mentioned before, I am a busy man, and I don’t have time to repeat myself” he was saying, walking her toward the elevator.

“Of course. Thank you, Mr Ren. I am looking forward to working with you” she managed, still trying to take it all in. As she stepped into the waiting lift she looked back and saw Kylo Ren watching her carefully, and he flashed her something that might have passed for a smile, if it had been any less predatory. Instead, the flash of teeth reminded her of a wolf, closing in, at your door, in your house, on the prowl.
Anayah’s brother Mikey was a boy on the edge, and Rey felt a sense of deja-vu when she met him. Tall and awkward, he radiated sullen, anxious energy and her heart broke for this young boy who had no one to protect him. After a long class in which she worried how to include him, they stood around while she left protein bars out for the after class snack and made mental notes about the students who took as many as they could. She’d make sure there was extra next time.

It was one of those hellish nights where she squeezed in an early class and then the late shift at the club. As she rushed through her shower, and then her dressing routine, and rode the train uptown to work, she congratulated herself on managing to put the newly resurrected Ben Solo from her mind. Ok, so, she’d had a bit of a slip, an immediate, knee jerk drop into an alcohol fuelled pity party, but, now, two days later, she was finding herself about to keep him out her mind for the most part. Her determination was a bright and tenacious thing and she was glad it had only seemed to grow as she got older.

She was still thinking about Anayah and her brother later, when she manned the till in the club. She ran through the extortionate amounts charged to exclusive cards, and smiled convincingly at the greasy high roller types who pressed £100 tips into her hands. It felt dirty, but she’s survived worse, and besides, it was for a good cause, she reminded herself, thinking that next time she should try and bring something more substantial to class, in case any of the weren’t getting enough access to food.

“Rey, you have to help me, rescue me, please, I can’t take it.” BB sighed dramatically, collapsing on the register. Her eccentric friend had worked at Resistance a lot longer than her, and Rey knew what a high limit she had for the assholes that came through the doors.

“What’s wrong?”

“Table 66, they are the worst, I don’t think I can go back there.”

“Tell Ackbar, I’m sure he’ll kick them out for you”

“No way, these guys will make a scene, I’m sure. They’re just settling the bill, can you take the receipt back to them?” she pleaded, flashing the most ridiculous puppy eyes at Rey. Rey grinned in return, always willing to spare her kind-hearted friend more stress.

“Give it here” she said, holding out her hand, and straightening her shoulders.

“Here I go.”

“Don’t let them see you cry!” BB called, only half jokingly.

“Never” Rey promised as she marched toward the infamous table 66. There were only four of them, these terrifying men, talking quietly, drinking alcohol that cost more than her rent for a month. She approached quietly, and waited until the man with his back to her, tall, even sitting, with a shock of rich, dark hair curling over his collar stopped talking, before placing the card and
receipt back on the table.

“Mr Ren, that’s everything settled for you” she said discreetly.

“Don’t tell me you finally managed to frighten off that little rabbit waitress Ren. Took you long enough, you must be losing your touch” a familiar voice said and Rey could help but glance at it. The cultured accent, the dripping disdain, and then, as the pale visage and red hair came into sight, she felt her stomach drop for the second time in a few days.

Armitage Hux. Again. What kind of bad luck she must be having, she couldn’t begin to understand, but the urge to flee was strong as Hux caught sight of her.

She was already stepping back from the table as she heard Hux let out a low whistle and a low laugh.

“Well well, if I eyes don’t deceived me. If it isn’t the little scavenger.” he said, and Rey froze. The entire table were silenced by his mocking remark, and Rey felt her cheeks flame red. She clenched her fists at her sides and took a deep breath.

Don’t let him win, she told herself, as she made to take another step away. She should breeze away as though she hadn’t heard, and avoid the table until they left. Hux knew she worked here now though, and the thought worried her. He was exactly the kind of vindictive sociopath that would frequent here more regularly just to toy with her.

“Rey?” a low voice broke through her deliberation. It was quiet, and so much deeper than she remembered, but it was achingly familiar, and she felt herself turn before she could think twice about it.

Ben Solo.

In the flesh. Unfolding himself from the low table to an awesome height.

Yep, her karma had been terrible this week, she thought wildly as her instincts screamed at her to run and hide from the confusing torrent of emotions rushing through her.

She struck again by how handsome he was now. It had been a long time that she had thought him anything but, but still, he had grown into all those awkward features perfectly. And seeing him from far, and standing before him made her realise all over again how very tall he was. Bigfoot big indeed. That impression of height was borne out by his broad shoulders, he was built like a powerhouse now, and she felt very small before him. She swallowed, realising that she had been staring. His brown eyes were on hers, and she found it hard to interpret the emotion behind the look that he was boring into her.

“Found your level I see, since St Augustines. Shit sinks, and all that. Given up pretending to be a decorator already?” Hux sneered, still seated behind the table, and Rey found herself blinking out the furious silent exchange with Ben. She cleared her throat, her words level and condescending.

“I suppose you’d know. How’s your father by the way?” she said, and was rewarded by Hux’ pale skin reddening to match his hair.

“You little bitch… I’ll have your job for that” he sniped. Rey could feel Ben’s eyes on her the whole time, silent beside her.

“Do your worst, Hux” she muttered, and turned away, suddenly needing to leave the tense confrontation and distance herself from the ghost who had appeared before her. Her heels clacked
on the polished wooden parquet floor, and she clenched and unclenched her fists as she walked as fast as she dared toward the staff rooms. With a too bright smile affixed to her face, practically a rictus grin, she turned to glance back, unable not to, needing to see him once more before he left, that old familiar pull, as though something inside her was tethered to him, humming in life once more.

Her eyes landed instantly on the towering body, striding after her, another waitress throwing herself to the side to avoid being bowled over. Ben’s face was unreadable still, a tense mask with a clenched jaw. Her fingers reached the keypad on the staff room, and she quickly typed in her code, and slipped inside, shutting the door immediately behind her, leaning back against it with a breath of relief.

Had she really just run away from Ben? She hadn’t seen him in 6 years, and as soon as she does, she turns tail and runs? Any fantasy she’d ever had of meeting Ben again, when she was older, sophisticated, when he couldn’t deny that she was a woman, were gone.

“Rey?” his voice came through the door, and she jumped away from it, before remembering he couldn’t open it. She backed away, watching the door as though it were a ticking bomb, her heart in her mouth. Hearing her name in his voice was bringing back all kinds of memories, good and bad, almost all painful.

“Rey – can you hear me?” he asked and she bit her nail, standing indecisively torn between opening the door or continuing to hide.

“Ignore Hux. You aren’t fired” he continued. She remained quiet. It might make her the biggest coward in the world, but she couldn’t face him just now. She wasn’t prepared and she needed to build some kind of defence against this hole in her heart that had just blasted open again.

She took her break, slipping out the back door for some air. She pulled out her phone and called Phasma.

“What? I’m still at work” Catherine said irritably, and Rey struggled to find the words she needed.

“Rey, what’s wrong?” her snappishness being replaced by concern.

“Its – I ran into him. I was working and I went to the table, and then he was there.” Rey said quietly, knowing she didn’t have to specify who she was talking about. She heard Catherine breath in sharply.

“What happened?” she asked after a moment.

“He said my name, and stood up and I… ran away”

“You ran away? Then what?” Catherine asked.

“Then… nothing, I’m still hiding”

“Rey” it was said in a whoosh of breath, and Rey closed eyes tightly.

“I know. It was stupid” she said.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I mean, I’m fine, considering” she muttered, feeling foolish for overreacting so much.
“Tell me what to do now”

“Now, you go back to work, you smile, you make your tips, you be professional. If Ren is there, be courteous but busy, if not, forget about him”

“Ben”

“What?”

“You said Ren” Rey corrected her. There was a small pause over the line.

“Right, sorry. Ben”

“Ok. Thanks. I’ll see you at home”

“See you later.”

Rey hung onto her phone several seconds after Catherine had gone, schooling her face into impassivity. She tucked her phone into her formal shorts. Ridiculous but mandatory, and headed back inside.

She unlocked the staff room door, and was relieved to find no overbearing, oversized males lingering outside. She went out to the servers island, smiling at BB when she drew near.

“What is going on? Did you just take a break? I thought you already took it. Was it that table, did they upset you?” BB was looking guilty at leaving Rey to take over her section.

“No, don’t worry. I’m fine. Just got a bit dizzy for a second there.” The last thing she wanted was BB freaking out loudly at work. She spotted her manager giving her look, and grabbed the leather-bound drinks menus.

“Better get back to it” she muttered as she walked amongst the familiar tables. Ben and Hux’ was thankfully empty, and she saw someone clearing the remnants of their drinking session onto a tray.

She surveyed her section, and went to the new tables, handing out menus to people who had recently arrived. It was busy work and it helped stop her mind for going into overdrive.

At the last to the back, and just when she was starting to calm down again, she saw him.

Sitting alone, his back to the corner, one arm resting casually on the table, the other on his lap. He was watching her. There was a complete stillness to him that was new. As a teenager, he had been full of kinetic energy, a buzzing, vibrating power inside a half gown shell. Now, he sat still, like a coiled cobra, waiting for the right moment to strike. She let out a long breath, and clutched the last drinks menu to her chest like a shield, approaching him reluctantly. She offered him the drinks menu, which he cast aside without looking at.

“You came back” he said, looking up at her from his seat, his face still closed to her.

“And you waited” she muttered, shifting on her high shoes, rotating her ankle for a moment, the movement reflexive during long shifts. The motion caused his eyes to lower, and they did so slowly. They moved from her face, and down her legs to her feet, before blinking back up to her face. She couldn’t read his face, that expressive face that used to tell her his every thought, was completely closed to her.

“I kind of had to come back, you can’t really just leave when you want to, being work and all” she
said, fighting the urge to blush at his leisurely survey of her body.

“And you work… here” he said, his words lined with an edge of contempt. She stared at him, a little shocked.

“Yes, I work here. What is it to you?” she asked, defensively, crossing her arms over her chest and looking him in the eye.

“Nothing. I just thought you’d be destined for better things. Things you were passionate about, unless that’s being fawned over by drunken business men” he said, casting a contemptuous look around her. It infuriated her so much, that after years of being apart, he still felt he had the right to pick apart her and her choices, as though he still knew her.

“Not that it’s any of your business., but I do have another job that I am passionate about, several of them, in fact, but there isn’t exactly much left over after rent and student loans to eat, so this works for now” she snapped, wondering why she was justifying herself to him.

“So, you did go to college” he said, and she could have sworn a hint of emotion touched his impassive face, but it was gone before she was sure. She didn’t answer, just stared at him.

“What do you want Ben? I have to get back to my shameful job, and you need to order or leave” she suddenly announced, spying her boss looking her way again.

“I’ll take a single malt of your best Whiskey”

“Scottish or Japanese”

“You choose” he said shortly, leaning back as if dismissing her. She grabbed the menu off the table and turned away, feeling his eyes on her back the whole way.

She put in his drink order and check on her other tables quickly. A Texan business man, who was a regular, touched her arm as she cleared his glass off the table, leaving a hefty tip, before grabbing Ben’s drink and making her way back to him.

“Here you go” she said, placing the drink gently on the table, and taking the card he had put out. She looked up to see his eyes were fixed on the Texan across the room.

“Do you know that man?” he asked tightly, as she shook her head and tapped his card to get his attention.

“Are you fine with closing out your bill?” she asked.

“Why? Do you want me to stay?” he asked.

“I don’t care what you do” she said quickly, willing her expression to be neutral. He moved his intense gaze to her face, studying her again, and she flashed his card again.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes, close it out” he said, settling back with his drink. She took his payment card to the register, and absently looked at the details as she charged the exorbitant amount for two fingers of whiskey. The black Amex had a name embossed in gold, and she ran nails over the raised letters frowning.

“Who’s Kylo Ren?” she asked when she got back, handing him the receipt and the card.

“I am” he said.
“No, you’re not. You’re Ben Solo” she said slowly. A muscle ticked in his jaw at her words, the only sign of displeasure.

“No, I’m not. I haven’t been in a very long time”

“Since when?” she challenged.

“Since the last night I saw you, I believe, certainly not since my father died” he said it so casually that she found herself nodding along before the words registered. She froze, that left over part of her heart that still remembered the angry young man he’d been, hurting for him.

“I didn’t know that. I’m sorry” she said quietly, her eyes searching his face for a hint of the boy she’d known.

“Don’t be. I’m not” he said, his tone brooking no disagreement. She stared at his hardened face.

“Ben, you can’t mean-“ she started, but was soon interrupted by him putting the empty glass down with perhaps a little too much force and standing.

“I do mean it, and don’t call me Ben. I’m not Ben, not the kid you knew. He’s gone” the man before her instructed patiently, though she could hear the fire just under his careful tone.

“I don’t understand” she replied honestly.

“That’s fine. You don’t have to. Forget the past, let it die, we have no need of it. All you need to know is that Ben Solo was a pathetic child, and he is gone” his words cut into her, little flying pieces of self-hatred and anger, so deep they embedded in her skin.

He straightened his suit jack, atop a waistcoat and trousers, a deep unrelenting black, and he almost resembled some kind of craven demon risen from hell for a moment, his hair a black helmet around his striking face, the gentle lights of the bar not touching him, seeming to shrink back from his intimidating presence.

“Why did you wait for me then, if the past is to die?” she asked suddenly, wondering what on earth he could want from her.

“I’m not used to people running away from me” he said, stepping into her personal space.

“That’s funny. I am” she murmured, her hazel eyes flicking to his for a moment, and a sense of regret seemed to slide over him, as removed as he was.

“What time do you finish?” he asked suddenly, keeping her off balance with the change of topic.

“Late” she replied. He watched her a moment longer, and then reached for his phone. He unlocked it with hard taps and held it out to her.

“Put your number in” he instructed, that old familiar controlling command she remembered from so long ago. It rankled her, and she found herself shaking her head.

“Put your number in Rey, now” he said, sounding even more bossy than before.

“No. No I won’t and you can’t make me.” She ground out, folding her arms for emphasis. He glared at her a beat longer, before tucking his phone into his pocket.

“Still as contrary as always, still rebelling against authority, you haven’t changed” he said, though by his tone, she didn’t feel like it was an insult.
“You are hardly an authority over me Ben”

“I told you not to call me that. My name is Kylo Ren” Rey couldn’t help the snort that flew past her lips.

“I am not calling you that. I’m sorry, but I just can’t. You’ll always be Ben Solo to me” he was silent, and seemed to be contemplating something in his mind.

“Perhaps its best if you don’t address me by name at all, if you wish to disregard my choice” he said, and Rey felt a sting at his words. Kylo Ren was a name he had chosen for himself, apparently in the aftermath of his father’s death. She couldn’t know what he went through then, the dark places he might have visited that led to him changing his name, then again, she only didn’t know, because he had pushed her away before and cut off contact.

“Perhaps the very best thing would be to say goodbye and not see each other again. That way, I don’t have to call you anything”

“No. I don’t think that’s going to work for me” he said solemnly.

“Well… it works for me” she bit out, feeling the anger and frustration that had been rising the entire bizarre episode start to spill out. She spun around and stomped away down the rows of tables. She lingered in the back for a while, making a restock list. She didn’t venture out again until BB came to get her at midnight, and they collected their things and made their way to the train. She felt as though she had seen a ghost, and her heart had still not calmed, his new face emblazed across her vision, so much so that whichever way she turned her head, she saw him.

“Are you ok?” BB finally asked, as Rey stared numbly out the subway window, watching the darkness, broken by the odd station, flash by.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine” she reassured her, willing herself to believe it. Nothing had changed, she told herself sternly. Nothing had changed, so why did it feel like everything had.

Chapter End Notes

So enter adult Kylo- manipulative, scheming, twisted, strives to be emotion-free, still obsessed with Rey
Rey - fiesty, determined, full of light and positivity, still not over her unfinished business with Ben

Welcome to Thunderdome- two men enter, one man leaves... lol, just kidding, but seriously, its going to be rough, in this fic Kylo Ren is the worst (imagine John Ralphio's voice)

Let me know what you think!
“I just don’t understand why you had to buy them before the meeting” Jessika complained as they slogged up the subway stairs in the stifling afternoon heat.

“Are you kidding? These are half price, and they’re chocolate, the girls’ favourite” Rey huffed as she attempted to close the zip on her straining bag. She was nervous, as they pushed into the air-conditioned lobby of First Order Finance. It didn’t take a genius to work out how Ben had ended up at Resistance, especially after Jessika had filled her in on the meeting where she had pitched to the President, Kylo Ren and won the bid.

It’s not personal, it’s just business, she told herself like a mantra, searching for a feeling of calm and peace as they ascended in the lift toward the executive floor. The hallway was deathly quietly, and thick carpet suffocating all sounds as they moved down the hall toward a large corner office, and Rey say the black matt name plate outside.

Kylo Ren
President

Jessika knocked before Rey could start to second guess herself, and the door was opening.

The first thing she thought about the man standing at the door, was that he suited his chosen name, Kylo Ren. It had a coldness, a steely reservation about it that suited this man. Seeing him here, in his natural habitat, she started to understand that the name change had not just been skin deep.

He was dressed completely in black again, and was already staring at her with an intensity he seemed to have perfected in their years apart.

“Good afternoon Miss Pava, Miss Nessuno, please come in” he said, as they walked past him into the spacious office, that was about as warm and inviting as the rest of the soulless building. She felt the ghost of a hand on the small of her back, and stiffened immediately, flashing a glance at Ben, who was already striding around the large desk.

“Can I offer you any refreshments?” he continued. They both shook their heads, and Jessika launched into discussion about the next steps of the remodel process. She brought some artwork they’d prepared out her bag and spread them around on the table, while Rey made notes about the things Ben wanted. So far, it seemed maximising productivity was in and creating a harmonious atmosphere was out. She was unable to stop a discreet eye roll at yet another sanitary hand wash station and efficiency measures.

“Sorry, Miss Nessuno, do you disagree with my specification?” Ben suddenly said, and Rey straightened her spine under his scrutiny.

“Not at all, it all sounds very… clean” the word clean was spat out in an accusatory way, that made it perfectly clear what she thought of his artistic vision.

“And what would you prefer?”
"Maybe something that would bring out the best in people, harmony" she said. He watched her critically.

"So, Yin yang symbols hung around the office? A yoga studio and a juice bar?" he challenged.

“That would be wasted, given the management style, there is no avoiding stress here” Rey bit out, unable to stop herself. Kylo sat back in his chair, and gestured for her to continue.

“What is? Given you haven’t worked here yourself, I’m interested in how you could possibly know”

“Because I know you” Rey said, her eyes pulled to his, she was caught in the storm brewing between them. She was discovering a latent pool of absolute fury at this man calling himself Kylo Ren and his calm and infuriating attempts to insert himself into her life, for what motivation, she couldn't quite grasp.

“It’s domineering, controlling and oppressive. People are afraid of losing their jobs. It’s in the air. There’s no sense of stability, management is fickle and unpredictable” she said, and crossed her arms over her chest, raising her chin a little in the silence that had fallen between them.

“Rey” Jessika said quietly and she could hear the horror in her friend’s voice. She wanted to turn to her and apologise, tell her she was wrong for thinking she could do this, be in the same room as this man and not lose it, and it was her fault they were losing the contract.

“It’s ok, Miss Pava. I enjoy being challenged and Miss Nessuno raises some excellent points. If not a little uncouthly” he said, and Rey couldn’t help the scowl formed in the wake of his words.

“So, tell me, how you’d fix that?” he said, sitting forward, open and engaging in posture for once. Jessika jumped in, no doubt hoping to steer the conversation back to safer ground, while Rey let what she had just said sink in. She couldn’t quite shake the feeling Ben was enjoying this, though nothing external showed it.

Jessika was showing him some of their ideas, and Rey saw the moment when Ben recognised one of her paintings. He stilled, stopped flicking through the pages, and slide a finger in to bookmark it. She didn’t know why the simple action made her heart beat faster. Rey took the time when he was busy to observe him, his new mannerisms, though, when he pushed a large hand through his hair, she had to look away. If you look too long at the past, it looks back.

They moved onto talking about scheduling and time frames, and Rey almost jumped when she realised Ben had spoken her name.

“You’d be here, during the process?” he repeated softly, and Rey felt her Jessika’s eyes shoot to her nervously, no doubt worried about what new hell she was about to unleash on their client. She shook her head.

“Consultants consult occasionally at different parts of the process” she said, unable to read the hint of emotion she could see in his eyes. He eventually turned away and returned to behind the glass desk.

“I wish the process to be as seamless as possible for my employees, I’d be happy to pay extra for the creative consultant to spare more of her time, to avoid unnecessary back and forth” he said, and Rey felt irritated at his attempt to manoeuvre her, even as she wondered why he was bothering.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible” Rey said flatly, even as Jessika was getting out a notepad.
“20% extra, on top” he said, and Jess nodded, her excitement only showing through her bouncing foot. She wrote a figure on the pad of paper and angled it to Rey, with an underscored PLEASE! written below. It made Rey’s throat dry. The little girl who always worried about making rent and having enough for food afterwards was already nodding.

“Ok, that’s fine” she said, glancing up at Ben, who was still watching her. She looked away to the window. Ben summoned a secretary from somewhere.

“Now, Miss Pava, if you’d like to accompany Margot, we have a cheque for you, and you need to schedule diaries.” He said. Rey jumped up, grabbing her camera and making to follow Jessika.

“Of course”

“And if I may have a moment longer with the concepts, perhaps Miss Nessuno can answer any questions I have, until you return” he suggested reasonably. Rey squashed an instinctive protest as she watched as Jessika leave quickly. The heavy glass door swung slowly shut behind her, leaving them alone.

“Which concept would you like to know more about?” she asked blandly, skirting around the desk to spread out the folders, feeling him approach behind her, until he stood at her shoulder.

“Which one do you prefer?” he asked.

“I like them all” they stood a moment longer in silence, until Rey couldn’t contain it anymore.

“What are you doing Ben? How did you even… I mean, is this just all a coincidence?” she burst out.

“It seems fate is connecting us, once more” he mused, as she snorted.

“I hardly think so. Did you come to Resistance the other night just to-” She said, biting her lip to stay her heartsick words.

“Just to what?” he asked, suddenly closer than she had thought when she turned around. She refused to back away from him, just settled for crossing her arms over her chest and staring him down.

“Just to upset me” she said bluntly, and saw a frown cross his features.

“No, that wasn’t my intention” he said, and she could see as they spoke, more and more emotion flitting across that hard mask he had worn in his interactions with her so far.

“What was your intention? What are you doing!?” she demanded, angry at him for pushing himself into her balanced life, and angry at herself for caring.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m doing when it comes to you. I never did” he admitted in a rush, looking almost surprised at himself in the wake of his words.

He seemed to take a grip on himself and step away, walking to a pitcher of water on the desk and pouring two glasses and setting one before her, before almost draining the other. Seemed certain manners had survived Ben’s transition to Kylo Ren, Rey thought, watching him.

“Catherine Phasma submitted the portfolio, even though it lacks the recognition of the others, no doubt as a favour to Miss Pava” he said suddenly, filling in some of the blanks in his fate theory.
“If it lacks the recognition of others, why did you chose it?’ Rey demanded, unaccountably stung by the implied criticism.

“It had talent.” he said, matter-of-factly, refilling his glass, his hand was tightly wrapped around it.

“Wait, did you say Phasma? Are you two still in touch?” she asked, her mind working furiously at the thread, pulling it. Catherine had never mentioned being in touch with Ben, even after she knew Rey had met him again.

“It’d be a little difficult not to be, as she is an employee of First Order” Ben said mildly, watching the expression on her face.

“You didn’t know” he stated. She saw the way his dark eyes seemed to gobble up her emotions, greedily drinking in signs of feeling from her, though the rest of his face had regained it impassive caste.

“Why should I know, I’m only her roommate” she said, a little hurt, before straightening her spine and resting her hands on her hips.

“Which concept do you prefer?” she asked at length, bringing them back to work. He looked back to the folders on the table, perhaps sensing her discomfort with discussing her friend further with him. She found it oddly empathetic, or maybe he just didn’t care.

“Number three. It’s yours, isn’t it”

“Do you prefer it? Or is it mine?” she asked, seeing the shape of Jessika approaching, through the frosted glass wall panel.

“Both”

The door opened on well-oiled hinges, and Jessika stopped in the doorway, no doubt reading the thick tension in the room. She looked between Ben and Rey, probably nervous Rey had said or done something to offend him yet again.

“We are all set” Jessika said, and Rey immediately slung her camera across her body and gathered up the filmy folders on the desk.

“Thank you for your time and we will be in touch shortly” Jessika was saying, and Rey took the opportunity to slip from the room. There was only so much of his cryptic coolness she could take in one day, and she had just about met her limit.

“Rey” he called, appearing at the door holding her bag. Cursing herself, she went back for it, Jessika continuing on to call the lift.

“Thanks” she muttered, steeling herself to hide how flustered he made her.

She took the strap from him, his finger just lightly touching hers as she did, the contact sending a wicked snap of heat through her. She was shocked by it. That he still affected her, after all this time. That she could still feel it, when she had closed that part of herself off so completely.

There had been a time when touching him had felt like coming home. She looked up at him in confusion, as his dark gaze seemed to pull hers to him.

“Hungry?” he asked, raising a fiendish eyebrow at her. The look on his face, paired with his low tone seemed so utterly suggestive for a moment, she had no idea what he could be talking about,
her mind flying straight to the gutter.

“That always was your favourite” he continued, seeming closer now than he had been a moment before. Her bag hung from her hand, and she felt him pull the strap carefully up her shoulder, settling it there as she stared at him, the weight of the bag pulling it in all directions drunkenly.

“Anything with chocolate” he finished, with an almost smile. The chocolate, protein bars, her bag, her thoughts caught up with themselves suddenly and she looked down to see the zip burst open on the top of her bag, and her very many chocolate protein bars stuffed inside.

'Rey?' Jessika called, holding the lift, and Rey tore her eyes from his.

“See you soon, Rey” he said quietly, as she turned from him and hurried to the lift, her bag hitting her thigh with every step, her hand still blazing and that reminder of their shared past burning brightly in her mind. Her last glimpse of Ben was him standing, so dark in those monotone surroundings, that shadow of a smile dropping away as she left, overtaken by an emptiness etched into the lines of his face, the kind that is years in the making.

Catherine felt as though she was being watched on the subway home, and all the way up the front stairs to her and Rey’s apartment. As soon as she got to the door and opened it, falling inside, she took a deep breath, and tried to tell herself it was just paranoia. She started up the stairs, her legs tired from a full day of work, thinking about the chemical analysis report she’d taken a picture of with her phone, right behind Kylo Ren’s back. It was the most daring thing she’d ever done, and it still gave her a thrill when she thought of it.

As she unlocked the door and entered, she was surprised to find Rey already home. She was sitting on the couch, with a bottle of wine open in front of her, and a glass in her hand. She was staring at a sketch pad on her knee, a pencil in the other hand.

“No Resistance tonight?”

“That sounds like a pop song” Rey snorted into her glass, as Catherine dropped her things and rounded the couch, looking down at her friend.

“What’s up?” she asked, sensing straight away a strange energy emitting from Rey.

“Grab a glass, sit. We need to have a conversation” Rey said, and looked up at her. Catherine knew instantly who it was about. That was the things about guilt, She’d been waited for something like this to happen since Rey had called and said she’d met Ben again. She took her time pouring a glass of white, sitting gingerly on the couch and facing Rey.
“Ok, let me explain. When I first got the job, I wasn’t sure I’d last past probation, and we didn’t live together then anyway, so I didn’t really think about it. I didn’t even know at first. I knew my boss, and the founder was a man called Kylo Ren, but I didn’t see him for a while, and then, when I did, I couldn’t be sure.” Catherine said, wondering if Rey would believe her, as far-fetched as it sounded. Rey nodded reluctantly.

“He’s different” she acknowledged.

“Not just different, he’s like another person. I didn’t know him like you did back then, so for me, it was more the feeling of remembering Ren from something before, and it not quite clicking. Eventually, I got it, when I saw him once, looking at the newspaper on his desk. He wasn’t reading it, but he was staring at a picture, and his finger touched the surface gently, as if to wipe something away. After, I saw the same edition on the way home, and it was pictures of a charity gala, with Leia Organa on the front, and I figured it out. Not long after, he asked me about you, so I guess I would have figured it out then anyway” Catherine said, surprised to find her wine almost finished.

“What did he ask?”

“Just general things, if I knew where you were living now, what you’d done after high school, if Jack still lived at the school. I didn’t tell him anything, I wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, you’re good at doing that, it seems” but this time, Rey’s lip tilted a little, and Catherine relaxed. She was forgiven.

“Didn’t you think submitting Jessika’s portfolio might bring us into contact?” she asked mildly.

“Yeah, that wasn’t well thought out, but it was so hard to deny her…” Catherine said morosely.

“Are you upset? Did you not… want to run into him again?” Rey considered it, her head tilted to the side, wrapping her hands around her knees.

“No. I think a part of me always knew I would” she said finally, before looking up at Catherine with a laugh.

“Is that weird?”

“No. I don’t think so… you have unfinished business” Catherine said mildly.

“I think he feels the same” she added, thinking of the remote vulnerability she had seen when her intimidating boss had asked about their mutual friend.

“He said something to me, about fate connecting us.” Rey mused.

“Maybe so, maybe you were meant to meet again, to get over all that happened before.”

“Maybe.” Rey agreed, though she couldn’t help but wonder why it felt so like the start of something, rather than the end.

Kylo Ren watched himself in the mirror of the elevator. He tried to shed the softness seeing Rey
had brought into his visage, strapping on his armour, piece by piece, adopting the façade his mentor required of him. The façade he required of himself, to endure.

The red light of the room was meant to be soft on the eyes, but it always took Kylo several minutes to adjust to the low illumination, seeing only blurry, half shapes and the glow of electronic equipment to orient himself, as he stepped reluctantly from the bright lift.

“Come, Kylo Ren. I can see you are troubled, as I haven’t seen you troubled in years. Tell me, my son, what ails you”

When exactly Professor Snoke had started to call him son, Kylo wasn’t sure, but tonight, more than other nights, it rankled. He walked into the darkness, and blinked, trying to locate the old man by the sound of his voice.

“It is nothing”

“It is not nothing, if I say so” Snoke said imperiously, and Kylo nodded his head reflexively.

“Hux tells me we are behind on authorisations for the next round of drug trials. This will bring the company much money and power, why do you dally?” his teacher asked, and Kylo felt unease working up his throat.

“There are… some discrepancies in the paperwork. Perhaps it would be best to rerun the trials” he suggested, already flinching back from Snoke’s wrath, which was sure to follow. Silence met his statement, and after a few seconds, he looked up to find the man himself perched on a chair not far from him, surrounded by his medical equipment and screens of monitors, through which Kylo could see almost every room in the building. Snoke was looking at him, his head to the side.

“Yes, Now I see. I wasn’t sure, I knew her but briefly, though I knew your infatuation was cell deep. It is her, the misfit orphan from your childhood.”

The thought that Snoke had seen Rey, had been watching her, walking innocently through the halls of their lair, chilled his blood and made his mouth dry. He swallowed down that fear, instinctive and clouding.

“She has nothing to do with the reported findings being suspect” Kylo protested, but quieted as Snoke held up a warning hand.

“You expect me to believe that your lack of faith in your teacher, and your reticence to carry out your duty to this company have nothing to do with the girl’s appearance? How coincidental.” Snoke voice was cruel as it mocked him. It told Kylo that his denial wasn’t believed, and it set his teeth on edge.

“She means nothing to me.” He said, and the falseness of the statement rang hollowly in his ears. He was glad the room was dark, glad Snoke couldn’t see the lie written firmly across his features.

Rey had never meant nothing to him, she couldn’t, quite the opposite in fact. He had been able to hide away his weakness for her while she had been absent from his life, but now, back in all her piercing glory, his mask was crumbling. How brittle it must have been to begin with, he thought lowly. Such are things built on death and despair.

“You feel compassion for her, and it will be your undoing. You must recognise this in yourself before you can seek to rectify it.” Snoke snapped, clearly not believing his lame lie.

“You must not let her distract you again, you must ensure that you are honest with yourself.”
Snoke was saying.

“If she makes you weak, either cut her out your life, as you did your mother.” He continued, with brutal efficiency, slicing Kylo in half with the cruel words.

“Or, if that pains you so, find a way to reduce her influence, by exploring your curiosity and ridding yourself of it once and for all!” Snoke finished roughly. Kylo jerked his head up at his mentor, the man who had been with him for longer than he could remember, a cold hard voice of reasonable contempt and subversion in his ear since boyhood. He always deferred to him, he knew best, Kylo had learned it well enough by now.

“You advise me to – enter an arrangement with Rey” even as he said it, his traitorous heard beat a tattoo of hope.

“If you must, to rid yourself of your earthly base desires to know her. We all have weaknesses Kylo Ren. She is yours” Snoke said, and Kylo felt he was being dismissed. He started to turn away toward the elevator, pausing only as a question occurred to him.

“Professor?”

“Hmm”

“What is your weakness?” he asked, and for some reason, he was afraid to hear the answer.

“My weakness, my dear boy – is you”

Kylo turned back to the elevator, driven forward by a feeling of nausea and terror.

He felt Snoke’s eyes on him as he waited for the doors to open, and stepped inside. Only once they had closed and the lift was plummeting down, did he allow his hands to shake, resting his forehead on the cool interior wall.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it’s late! On a writing streak just now, and your comments and discourse provide fuel for the fire. Thank you so much for embracing this story xx

Let me know what you think!
I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the comments, I love reading them and writing after, letting it help guide and refine my plot and nuances.

This is a long one, it got a bit away from me - could probably cut but a lot, but what's editing? I don't know you.

I think I've definitely accomplished setting up Kylo Ren as a baddie, I almost feel sorry for the guy from your comments. In truth, much like the movie - this story's Kylo Ren is a victim. Don't get me wrong, he has done shitty things himself, it's not an excuse, but he is a very damaged person, and it might make it easier to understand where his internal motivations and failings come from.

Much like in TFA at first, I hated him pretty much, and then we got to see more, his weaknesses, vulnerabilities - his fear, his past. This story's Kylo will go through the same. I hope you can keep a little forgiveness in your heart for him, if he earns it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that week, after sweating through another hot training session at Knights of Ren, one that Mikey Anayah’s brother hadn’t shown up for, she thought about her upcoming shift on Saturday night. She wondered if Ben would show up, and chased the thought away immediately. What she didn’t need was to fixate on him again. Who knows what men like Kylo Ren did at the weekend, she thought grimly. Probably poured over plans to take over the world and sacrifice virgins. No, she reminded herself wryly, the latter wasn’t his thing.

She climbed the stairs to the apartment, trailing the heavy training bag in her hand, stopping suddenly, when she saw a sliver of darkness breaking the usually white expanse of wall at the top of the stairs. It was dark, the only light drifting up from below, but even then, usually, the white door and white wall were pretty seamless, when the door was shut. The crack of darkness was about a foot wide.

The door was open, but the lights were off.

She finished climbing the stairs and gently lowered her bag to the floor, pulling one of her staffs out its holding place on the outside of the bag. She held it to her side, and approached the door. She wondered briefly is she was being stupid investigating herself, but Rey couldn’t help but revert back to her scavenger childhood, and if someone was in her house, taking her things, she couldn’t stop herself from drifting to the doorway.

She carefully pushed the door open soundlessly, and stepped inside. She left the lights off, which would just alert someone in another room, and let her eyes adjust for a few moments, gradually making out the shapes of the couch and fridge. She stepped into the room more fully, leaving the door open behind her, should she need to run for it. She then started to slowly and methodically check every room, always keeping her focus on the front door and her back.
10 minutes later, she was satisfied that there was no one there, and locked the front door and turned on the lights. What she saw brought a lump to her throat. Crushed glass littered the floor, picture frames had been pulled from the walls, pillows slashed on the couch, the kitchen cabinets emptied and bits of rice and pasta cracked under her feet as she inventoried the mess. She sat numbly and called Finn first, who told her what to do, then the police, followed by Catherine, and then and only then, she allowed herself a few self-pitying tears, cradling a picture of her and Jack to her chest.

Finn arrived first, calling from the door, with a soft knock.

“Rey? It’s me” she pushed herself to her feet and trudged through the debris to open the door.

“Shit” he breathed as he looked around his old home.

“Tell me about it” Rey sighed, going back to the couch. Finn passed her a bag of Chinese take out and a bottle of wine in a carrier bag.

“Your favourite” he said, open the cupboard under the sink for trash bags.

“The police said –“

“Not to touch anything… right. Erm, I think you might be out of glasses” he said apologetically as Rey twisted the screw top off the wine.

“No sweat, got it covered” she said dully, taking a big gulp of the slightly warm Sauvignon Blanc from the bottle.

“Is anything missing?” he asked, still waking room to room.

“I don’t know, I don’t think so… not that there was much to steal in the first place” she muttered, knowing she should muster the energy to check more thoroughly before the police came. Finn entered the living room and sank down on the couch beside her, wincing as further stuffing from the ruined pillows floated into the air at his weight.

Rey held a dumpling to his mouth, and he took it, chewing slowly. She offered him a pull of the wine, but he shook his head.

“You’ve earned it” he muttered, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pulling her into his side. He pressed a kiss onto her forehead.

“Does this mean I have to go to Ikea?” he said, sounding mildly afraid and Rey snorted. She heard the sound of the broken lock turning in the door, but before she could get worried, she heard Catherine saying her name.

“What a mess” Catherine was muttering, and Rey could hear the now familiar sound of someone crunching over the ruins of her domestic life.

“What a mess” Catherine was muttering, and Rey could hear the now familiar sound of someone crunching over the ruins of her domestic life.

“Have you called the police?” she asked. She seemed even more on edge than Rey.

“Yeah, about a half hour ago” Finn supplied, before standing up and making his way to the door.

Catherine sank onto the couch beside Rey and she offered her the bottle of wine. She surprised her
by taking a long swig.

“You guys should check your rooms for valuables, the police will need a list” Finn said, and Rey nodded, Catherine was already moving into her room, soft exclamations of alarm coming as she saw the extent of the damage.

Rey stood gingerly, putting the wine bottle down, suddenly a little shaky. She left Finn in the kitchen, picking salvageable food off the floor.

Her room was dark, and she saw that the bedside lamp was broken. The overhead lightbulb had been broken for a week or so, and she’d been too lazy to replace it, and she now cursed that oversight. She felt with her hands over a dresser top, and was lucky to find a scented candle and lighter, only knocked down the back. She lit it, her shaky fingers taking her a couple of tries, and let out a long sigh at the sight that greeted her.

Her pillows had been slashed, her mirror was cracked in numerous places, but worst of all, her art supplies were strewn about the floor, pastels crushed into the carpet, acrylics soaking through their tubes, as though trod on. One leg of her easel was snapped. She approached slowly, feeling her heart break a little, as she picked up the large canvas that had been on it, and turned it, to see a large rent down the front. That brought the tears back, and she felt a few hot trails of liquid drip down her cheeks, even as she laid the ruined canvas on the easel, which promptly toppled to the side.

“Rey?” Finn said, suddenly in her room. She swallowed, dashing her tears away.

“Locksmith will be here within the hour” he said, and she nodded gratefully. She kept her tear stained eyes from him, embarrassed to be showing such emotion in front of him, for some reason. It made her vulnerable, and she had already been too vulnerable with this man.

Do you guys want to come stay at ours?”

“You don’t have space” she reminded him.

“It’s ok anyway, it’s late, I’m tired, I just want to be at home”

Finn stepped around her, and slowly reached for the canvas that had fallen, righting the easel, bringing his back to brush against her. He set it down gently, looking at the broken leg with a sigh.

“You’re going to need a new one, I’m afraid” he said quietly. She nodded, her mind already wondering how long it would be before she could afford one, and if it should come before or after new plates and glasses. That was easy, she decided immediately. Before.

She realised she was shivering slightly, despite the warm air. He bent and picked up a cardigan on the floor, shaking it to check for glass, before holding it out to her.

“This neighbourhood isn’t the kind of place-“

“Stop. Leave it” she sighed, tired beyond belief.

“Fair enough, you get a pass because of tonight, but we need to think about moving, and soon” he huffed, gathering her into his chest for a hug. It was warm and comforting and she felt some of her tension melt away.
The police eventually showed up, and they gave statements, nothing much was missing from either room, making it seem just a random act of vandalism, which didn’t sit well with Rey.

Finn helped them clean up, piling things into trash bags and recycling piles. The flat looked pitifully empty afterward, scrubbed bare of its previous personality and quirkeness.

They pilled all the leftover pillows, blankets and comforters on the floor in the middle of the sitting room and settled in, all three together.

Catherine was strangely silent, and as Rey struggled to relax, even with the new locks, she glanced over at her friend, seeing her struggle.

“Are you ok? I’ve never seen you bite your nails before” she said, turning on her side to get a better look at her face. Catherine let out a long breath.

“No, I’m not ok. I think this might have been my fault” she confessed.

“What do you mean?” Catherine hesitated a long moment, before seeming to reach a conclusion, she sat up, pulling a blanket over her shoulders and braced her elbows on her crossed legs.

“I have to tell you something, and I know I should have before, I had the chance to, but I didn’t and now, it’s my fault. What if you’d come home earlier-“ Catherine bit off, and jerked her face to away, red staining her cheeks. Rey realised the stoic girl was trying her best not to cry.

“I haven’t told you everything, about First Order, and why I decided to work there.” She paused, at a loss as where to started.

“I smell a conspiracy, go on” Finn said, giving her an encouraging smile.

“I need to break a big story, something really different and unexpected, and I thought, I think, I’ve found it, at First Order. I got a tip at my old newspaper, but my editor wasn’t interested, so I decided to quit, go work there, see what I could dig up. I was at a dead end at the paper, stories about health code violations and holiday parades. I figured, if they gave me the job, despite my previous experience, then, they are opening themselves up for being investigated, I never lied about my background.” Catherine said, finding her feet with the story and settling back a little.

“I don’t think they would have given me the job, too risky for them, but then… I don’t know how, but I think Ben… Kylo Ren, intervened.”

“Wait, who’s Ben?” Finn interjected and was ignored as Catherine ploughed on.

“He must approve all hires or something, because he definitely wasn’t in the interview, though maybe he was watching”

Rey raised an eyebrow at that.

“Almost every room has a camera, if you’re in the building, you’re almost certainly being watched. Snoke, the other… partner, watches the feeds, maybe Ben does too sometimes” Catherine explained.

“Ok, creepy, continue” Rey said.
“So, they hired me, and I started to look around, poke my nose into things, as well as I could without raising supposing. There’s a lot there, despite the fact that some of the projects they are funding are definitely linked to weapon research and manufacture, I’m pretty sure they sell to the highest bidder, whether that be terrorists, which, ok, isn’t that different from the government, but… it’s not good” Catherine continued.

“It’s the research funding that I feel like the story lies in, that, and maybe their drug trials”

“Drug trials?”

“They’ve made a lot of money funding research into new cure all, miracle pills, which get pushed through the appropriate restrictions with barely a glance. There’s so much corruption there, bribery, extortion maybe, I don’t know.”

“Do you think… Ben is part of all this?” Rey asked, a heavy stone sinking in her chest at the thought. Ben, the volatile and lonely boy, made into a monstrous machine of capitalist apathy, profiting off the mistreatment of others, casting himself further and further into darkness.

“I don’t see how he couldn’t be… he’s different now, you said it yourself”

“Please someone explain who Ben is!” Finn pleaded.

“My high school friend” Rey supplied, waving him to be quiet so she could listen.

“They have made enormous amount of money, and funnelled it into supplying arms to militant groups, radicals, extremists, in hidden and round about ways”

“Why do that? How does that make you money?”

“After a certain amount of money, maybe it’s not about acquiring wealth anymore, maybe it’s just about… watching the world burn” Catherine said, raising worried eyes to Rey’s. She knew that Rey must be thinking about Ben, and if he that kind of man. Rey was remembering his graduation, before everything had fallen apart, and the instant dislike she’d taken to Snoke and his seditious ideas.

“To free yourself of society and its judgements, to liberate yourself from the chains of morality and arbitrary rules and laws, is to be truly free"

"But – without morality, what would we do?"

"Whatever we wanted"

“It’s not Ben, I mean, I don’t think it is. It’s Snoke”

“But isn’t looking the other way just as bad? I’m pretty sure Kylo Ren’s name is all over the paperwork”

“Snoke influences him, he always did.” Rey whispered, sure of it in her heart.

“Who’s Kylo Ren?”
“My boss” Catherine said, only adding to Finn’s confusion.

“And who is Ben, in this?”

“He’s Kylo Ren”

“Ben is Kylo Ren” Finn repeated, looking more confused than ever.

“So, why could this be your fault?” Rey asked suddenly, circling back to where they started.

“I saw something on Ren’s desk, a chemical analysis report, it was probably nothing, but I’ve got nothing else to show for all my time there so far so I took a photo of it.” Catherine said, pulling her phone out and showing it to Rey.

“It didn’t work, too blurry, I was nervous and messed up. It probably doesn’t say anything incriminating anyway, but maybe it’s why someone broke in here”

“They thought you’d leave your phone here when you were at work?”

“Or maybe that I’d backed it up somewhere, I don’t know.”

“Maybe it was a warning” Finn said slowly, the words sending the temperature in the darkened flat falling a few more degrees.

“How did they know you took a picture?”

“The cameras I guess… Snoke is always watching. I can’t see one in Ren’s office, I thought that the prodigal son would be immune to the same scrutiny as the rest of us, but it seems he isn’t” Catherine said, mulling it over.

“I wonder if he knows that” Rey said, thoughtfully.

“Ok, someone needs to explain Ben or Kylo Ren or whoever he is, right now!” Finn demanded, and Rey obliged, though, as always it pained her. She explained to Finn how she hadn’t seen Ben in years, leaving out how they parted, and that he had shown up again, at First Order Finance, but they weren’t close anymore.

“What are you thinking? You were really close with this guy? Is there a story there?” Finn asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to believe that anyone could be complicit in something so awful, especially someone I used to know”

“People do messed up things” Finn said heavily.

She thought of Ben and his family. A little boy spoiled for material possessions and starved for understanding and attention. She thought of the same little boy growing into an angry young man, ready to direct his pain and loneliness outward, urged on by a dark voice in his ear. She thought of that same man so removed from emotion and feeling that there is only static where his heart used to beat. How much isolation from humanity can a soul take, before it forgets what it is to be human?

“Yes. People do” she agreed quietly.
First Order Finance’s offices were exactly what she imagined a faceless, soulless money monster would reside in. Too big, too impersonal and the sheer monotone of everything inside was overwhelmingly oppressive. She had been wandering about the various function rooms and meeting spaces for a few hours now, and could feel her creativity dying a painful death. There weren’t even any plants in the office, she thought in despair. As she walked, taking pictures of the spaces, she was mindful of the security cameras in every room and hallway, overlapping each other so there wouldn’t be any blind spots. It seemed over kill. She then thought of Snoke, squatting like some pale, fetid spider in a web of camera screens upstairs, watching all the little ants in his hill rushing about at his bidding.

“Trying your hand at art again, are we? No extra shifts going at the strip joint?” a sneering voice said to her as she helped herself to a coffee from the fancy machine, as instructed by Margot, Ben’s assistant. Before she turned, she pasted the brightest smile on her face and turned around cheerfully.

“Hey you, I was wondering when you’d crawl out your hole. Having a nice day?” she chirped. Hux scowled at her, preened to perfection in navy suit and purple shirt and tie, his red hair combed aggressively into neat submission.

“There was an awful smell, like refuse, wafting up the hall, I’d be remiss if I didn’t check it out” he sniffed and she couldn’t help rolling her eyes at him.

“Right, you really need to get some new material. Think outside the box, you can do it, I know you can.” She said, looking him in the eye as she made to pass.

“I believe in you” she said, and walked away grinning. Maybe being able to torment Hux would be worth suffering his presence.

She had worked her way up and down the labyrinthine floors of the building, getting progressively higher. Finally, unable to put it off longer, she found herself on the executive floor. She steered clear of the corner office with the black matt name plate and headed in the opposite direction. There was banquet door at the end of the hall, and she knocked gently, before pushing the door open.

She had thought it might be another empty conference room, with Margot telling her that there were no external meetings scheduled that day, so she’d be able to come and go from the public spaces with ease.

Her eyes darted from the one thing to the next, even while she took in the tall, black clothed man standing in the middle of the floor mats, spinning a katana with ease in an intricate motion. It must have only been a split second, before she adjusted and started to close the door, but it was too late. He had seen her.

“Rey” the words whipped out across the space between them, sharp and commanding, and it stopped her with her foot over the threshold, and hands already pulling the heavy doors closed.
He had been conspicuously absent all day, a fact that she had been irritated with herself for even noticing. With everything Catherine had said, she wanted to see him even less than before, especially here, in the den of evil, she thought, unable to tear her eyes away from him approaching her. He wore a black karategi, and Rey could see it was a heavy fabric, stiff and unyielding, the black belt barely distinguishable against the midnight fabric. His feet were bare, and his hair was falling around his face in loose waves that she remembered all too well.

His face was far too appealing, flushed from its usual parlour by the exercise, his high cheeks a softer pink, his dark eyes a little more alive than usual.

“I’m working” she stated, a little unnecessarily, as she couldn’t think of anything else to say, and instead looked around the room. It was decorated in a traditional style, with mats marking a combat space, and a tatami mat to the side for meditating. There were weapons around the walls, and her eyes were drawn to a staff mounted on the wall, a thing of beauty, inset with mother of pearl.

“Do you still practise?” he asked, following her gaze and lifting the staff off the wall with ease. He approached her slowly, holding it out to her. She nodded as she reached out a fingertip to trace the iridescent stone, before dropping her hands back to her sides.

It was too short for him, Rey thought critically as he set the end on the ground beside her, and nodded to it.

“Go ahead, try it out” he said. She shook her head, stepping backwards, suddenly sure that this was dangerous for reasons she couldn’t understand. He watched her, that same impassive look on his face as usual, before lightly throwing the bo at her. Her hands shot out instinctively, and she caught it smoothly, and turned a withering look on him. He had the audacity to smirk a little, the tip of his full lip tugged upward.

“It suits you” he said, stepping away and leaving her to admire the staff in her hands. She wrapped her hands around the light wood, balancing it between her two hands, getting a feel for the beautiful weapon. She experimentally struck out at the space in front of her, a short jab intended to push someone back. She couldn’t help the smile that snuck across her face. The green and pink sheen on the staff glittered with the movement and she whirled to sweep it around, feel the weight in an overhead move, when a hard clack reverberated up her arm, as the pale staff met a jet black one.

Her eyes shot to his as she looked at him in question. He twirled his own staff, a good foot longer than the one he’d given her, and it made a dark, gracefully loop in the air as he raised it into an opening stance.

“For old time’s sake?” he said quietly, that usual look of distance on his features replaced with one of concentration and something else. She wasn’t sure what to call it, but it seemed to be communicating some sort of intent. He looked at her with intent.

“No, I should get on” she said, dropping the point of the staff toward the floor, and then jerking it up at the last minute to knock away a jab from Ben.

“Stop it” she commanded, looking behind her to see where she could go. He feinted a move, an old tactic of his, that she recognised instantly, and went the opposite way to block, their staff meeting with a satisfying whack.

He smirked again, almost a real smile for an instant.

“Come on Rey, don’t waste this opportunity”
“What opportunity?”

“To beat the shit out of me, like I deserve” he said, and his words stayed her, her mouth dropping open a moment as she weighed his words.

“You think knocking you around a little would make up for – what happened? What you did?” she asked, her tone was hard and unflinching, and he met it equally honestly.

“No” he said, straightening up and shaking his head.

“No I don’t. I know there’s no way back. I know it’s too late” he said, and Rey shifted her grip on the staff, horrified to feel something similar to tears pricking her eyelids. She turned to the side and studied a calligraphy scroll decorating the wall, following the sweeping lines to try and calm the very visceral reaction she was having at his defeated words.

“But anger can be cathartic. Violence can be a release” he was saying, as she turned abruptly and brought her staff up to hit him in the side. He twisted away at the last moment, shock on his face morphing quickly into resolve and satisfaction. She stared at him, colour high on her cheeks. She felt a strength flowing through her, high and wild. It was anger she realised, anger and hurt. She advanced on him, bring up her staff in bursts of short, sharp hits, as he walked backwards deflecting. She attacked, he defended, for the most part.

Her strikes rained down hard, and she started to vary her pattern, turning, advancing, jabbing, striking. He managed to deflect most, though one or two hit their targets, his soft grunts urging her on.

“Fight back” she commanded, as another strike snapped his head back. He shook his head a moment to recover, and then, as she brought in an overhead too wide, he stepped into the circle of her arms, twisted her around and pulled her back against his chest.

“I don’t want to hurt you”

“Since when?” she grunted as she bucked against his staff, now pressed lightly against her chest, pinning her to him.

“Since always” she could feel his warm breath in her hair, and it sent goose bumps trailing down her spine.

“Well, it’s a little late for that” she said, stamping down in the instep of his bare foot. He let go, and she spun around, bringing her staff in a hard arc toward his jaw, stopping only at the very last second. She realised he was just standing there, despite having had time to defend, he hadn’t even raised a hand.

She dropped her staff, feeling hot and overwhelmed. Her clothes were a tight restriction on her skin that she couldn’t stand and her cheeks were burning. She stared up at him.

“What are we doing? What are you doing?” she asked, more confused than ever.

“I’m –“ he trailed off, seeming at a loss for an answer, his jet black staff made a lazy swirl in the air.

“I need to get back to work” she said decidedly. She made to leave the room, and was blocked by Ben stepping into her path.

“Have dinner with me”
“What? No” she said indignantly, pushing him aside, though as she passed, he caught her arm.

“A drink?”

“No way” she said, and pushed his arm away, and stopped as she felt the same hand grab her closer again. She glowered up at him.

“Coffee then?” Rey felt her fragile patience snap.

“Why?? Why are you pursing me like this, when you couldn’t have cared less about me 6 years ago, and haven’t thought of me since”

“You have no idea how often I’ve thought of you” he snarled back, stepping in, bringing their chests almost into contact.

“You are a constant presence in my head”

“Well, that’s your problem” She said, twisting from his grip and knocking his hand away with her staff, finishing with it in front of her in a defensive posture.

“In that case, what are you running away from?? Why are you so afraid?” he said.

“How dare you ask me that, do you really have no idea? Are you that blind?” she cried, refusing to turn her accusing eyes from his.

“Don’t you know what you did to me? How you fucked me up? I’ve never even – . I can’t – “ she couldn’t say it, couldn’t get the words out and instead struck her staff out to meet his, knocking it away hard, opening him to attack, though he instinctively turned out her reach, dancing away from her furious strikes.

“Can’t what?” he prodded and received a renewed strength of strike for his efforts. It was only a moment, a moment where she was open, preparing a hard jab and he could have taken it, disarmed her. But he didn’t, and the blow knocked him off his feet. She stood over him, her chest rising and falling rapidly, her staff poised at his neck as he looked up at her, his eyes fixed on her with impossible intensity.

“I wanted to know… if one of us had managed to escape that terrible affliction… that we once shared” he said suddenly, and she saw a look of naked vulnerability cross his face.

“What, being surly, difficult teens?” she sniped.

“Loneliness. We were both so lonely, until we met each other” his voice was a soft and honest murmur. She stared at him, trying to see him as the man he wanted to be now, superior and above it all, and yet in that question, she could only see the boy.

“I might be alone, but I am not lonely, anymore” she said, deciding to give him that, in the memory of Ben she saw lying before her.

“I’m glad” he murmured, and she heard in it everything that he wasn’t saying, that he was lonely, and had given up hope of that ever changing.

“Well, if that’s everything, I should be going” she said suddenly, his gaze seeing too much, showing too much. It was all too much. The locked box of their shared past was too dangerous, its destructive power too great, to play with like this.
“Wait. Stay. Just for a little while longer” he said, shifting up on his elbows. The neck of his gi gaped a little, and she could see a pale expanse of muscle underneath.

“Why?” she asked in exasperation. They were playing with fire, and she felt suddenly afraid.

“Because I am asking you to” he said, a note of underlying steel and frustration creeping into his tone, and she wondered if it pained him to be supplicant under her like this. He, who for as long as she could remember craved others submission and never his own.

“I see you still haven’t got that temper under control… or it just that you can’t get me under control, if that’s still your thing” she said, intended to wound him, instead, he pinned her with a dark look, full of intent and feeling, sitting up into an upright position carefully, forcing her staff to the side. And then, slowly, as though not to spook her, he raised his knees, his long legs bringing them into contact with the back of hers, causing her to pitch a little forward, and reached for her hips. Ever so slowly, he pulled her down until she was straddling him, cradled between his chest and his knees, her staff rolling off to the side.

Rey couldn’t think. She felt possessed. Her heart was pounding and she felt things, dark and intriguing things, that she hadn’t felt since the last time she had been touched by the same hands that were now locked on her hips. She didn’t know why she was allowing him to touch her at all, never mind pulling her into such a suggestive position, but her curiosity, her desire, peaked its head from a long-forgotten corner of her psyche and it felt a wild kind of longing. It felt hungry. The part that had been captured by the look on Eliza Montgomery’s face, that desired to know what Ben could do that would make someone look like that. The part of her that had learned what desire was from this man, and had never unlearned her reaction to him.

“That is indeed still my thing, and to be honest, nothing has ever trumped the 16-year-old you, kneeling before me, offering me the world” he said, his voice a lowly purr and Rey blushed scarlet at the words.

“Don’t. Don’t remind me. 6 years ago, you broke my heart. You abandoned me and rejected me, even though you knew – what that would do to me. Now, you’re making me relive it like it was nothing. Why do you hate me so much?” Rey asked with naked honestly, her hot skin prickling in embarrassment, and felt that dreaded, unwanted moisture wetting her eyes.

Her words made contact with him, their target true, she could see the sadness in his eyes, suddenly open to her again. When he looked at her she saw Ben, unchanged in their time apart, as lonely and afraid as ever. She also saw anger, and realised it was at himself, for hurting her. He dutifully added it to all the things he already hated about himself.

‘I don’t hate you Rey, I could never. You could run me through with a knife, knock my head off with your staff and I wouldn’t even be angry at you. I’ve never forgotten you in these years apart, you’ve never been far from my mind, and I regret that day constantly. I wish I could take it back. You’ve haunted me Rey.” His impassioned voice had frozen her to the spot. Her heart had taken up residence in her mouth, and it was all she could do to stare at him numbly. He was so close, and she could finally study his face at her leisure, seeing things she hadn’t before. A scar on his eyebrow, the tiredness around his eyes, a hint of stubble on his jaw.

“I don’t hate you Rey, I could never. You could run me through with a knife, knock my head off with your staff and I wouldn’t even be angry at you. I’ve never forgotten you in these years apart, you’ve never been far from my mind, and I regret that day constantly. I wish I could take it back. You’ve haunted me Rey.” His impassioned voice had frozen her to the spot. Her heart had taken up residence in her mouth, and it was all she could do to stare at him numbly. He was so close, and she could finally study his face at her leisure, seeing things she hadn’t before. A scar on his eyebrow, the tiredness around his eyes, a hint of stubble on his jaw.

“I want you to make me the same offer”

“Excuse me?” those next words jolted her from his thrall.

“I want you to allow me to accept your offer, as I should have then” He sat back and watched her
closely, as she thought furiously to sort her roiling emotions.

“I’ve surprised you” he stated, as she continued to stare at him in stunned silence.

“I –I thought it was too late. I thought the past had to die” she said numbly, throwing his words back at him, buying time to think, and then freezing even further as his large hands rose to cup her face, sweeping long fingers up the curve of her jaw.

“But not us, not this. We aren’t just the past, you cannot deny this feeling between us, we are now and tomorrow as well…” he murmured and then pressed his forehead against hers. She felt his finger trace a path over her lips, before being replaced by his lips. He kissed her more softly than she would have expected from this man who seemed to strive to be devoid of emotion. She felt a long, hot tear drip from her eye, trailing down her cheek to their lips, fused together in a slow, searing dance. She let her lips part, that same teenage abandon filling her, the Rey that threw all she had at this man suddenly trembling with victory, and the adult she’d become in the wake of his rejection pulling away all at once.

“Don’t be afraid – I feel it to” he whispered in the tiny gap she’d put between them, his breath still scorching her skin, now pressing his lips to the corners of hers, to her cheeks and jaw.

“I thought you threw me away to save me – save my soul, remember?” she said, cold memory filtering through the haze of desire that he was building in her. He leaned away to capture her with a look.

“I did, and it was the foolish hubris of youth. I understand my mistake now, my ego. I know you Rey, I can see your light. It was bright beyond belief when we were young, and now, it dazzles. You aren’t in any danger from me anymore” he said, sliding his hands to her waist, his skin coming into contact with a band of exposed skin and subjecting her to another fresh, flush of goose bumps.

“You won’t fall in love with me, as I am now. You couldn’t. I’m not the sort of man, you could ever love. You’re safe. You’ll be safe” he said with certainty, as he raised his hips under her a moment, and she felt the press of him for a fleeting second, hard and alien, male and urgent, and that reminder, as well as his words sent her scrambling back off him.

The spell was broken, as they stared at each other. He looked unkempt, his hair in disarray, his robe pulled to expose one shoulder, breathing hard and staring at her with fire in his eyes. And she was sure she looked the same, as reality descended slowly. She glanced up at the corners of the room, everything occurring to her at once. She saw the blinking red security light flashing. Ben followed her gaze, his own soft look hardening as he remembered the security feed.

“No one is watching”

“Right”

“He wouldn’t. This is private” Ben said, pulling himself up to standing, and Rey had to look away. He was too close and too far and she couldn’t think around him.

“I don’t think I can work on this project” she said slowly, straightening her top, and tucking her hair back in it’s bun. Her eyes were trained on the wall, the floor, anywhere but at the man standing to her side burning holes into her cheek with his eyes.

“Why not?” he said, though his words sounded defeated, empty once more. The mask of Kylo Ren slipping seamlessly into place.
“Because I don’t think I can be around you. I don’t think I want to” Or I maybe I want to too much she admitted to herself as she made for the door.

“Take the weekend. Think about it. For Pava Interior’s sake.” He said coldly, and she paused, fighting the urge to turn back and see him once more. To see if the man who had kissed her brokenly, and the one now ruthlessly trying to manipulate her, looked the same.

In the end, she just pushed open the door and left, the loud clang of the heavy metal shutting reverberating in the empty hall behind her.

Chapter End Notes

In conclusion - Kylo Ren has no game.

Comments are love xx
You guys! Thank you for the comments and kudos and everything. I'm trying to reply to comments, but if I haven't replied to yours, it's because I'm busy trying to bash the next chapter out in the tiny amount of time I have at odd moments during the day.

I feel like there is fears about this pic turning too Fifty Shades, or the controlling/domineering aspect suddenly taking it out of the realm of the established character dynamic - fear not.

In words of Uncle Luke - "This is not going to go the way you think"

A bit fluffier than usual, I hope you enjoy and let me know what you think!

p.s - next chapter is almost done... let's try for a double))

A low whistle sounded as Rey stepped out the cab, and she looked up to see Poe standing at the entrance to the club on his phone.

“Thanks for making me feel like a piece of meat” she said, with a sharpness she didn’t really feel. She’d been on edge since she’d practically fled First Order. His easy smile fell away and he said goodbye to the person on the other end of the line and hung up.

“Shit. Sorry. I thought it was…” he trailed off, his expression abased.

“Flattering? Right” she said with a stiff smile. She smoothed her short skirt down and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Let’s start again, can we?” Poe wheeled, putting his phone away and gently putting his hands on Rey’s shoulders and giving a quick, friendly hug.

“Hello sweetheart, you look very nice” he tried and Rey rolled her eyes at his theatrics.

“As does the birthday girl!” he said, turning to Catherine who had just managed to wrestle her long legs from the cab. He went and hugged her and Rey took a long, deliberate breath, willing herself to relax. Poe charmed Catherine into a smile, and Rey trailed behind them into the club.

It wasn’t too late yet, and the place wasn’t as packed as it would get later. The music was loud, and she had to shout in Poe’s ear to get his attention.

“Is Jess here yet?” He nodded in response and nodded to a roped off section toward the back of the dancefloor. She left Poe and Catherine at the bar and made her way to the couches she could see some of her friends already on.

“Rey!” Finn called, waving her over to a comfy looking seat. She nodded and smiled at him,
making her way to Jessika. She sat down beside her and waited for her to finish her conversation with a man leaning over from the bar.

“Rey, hi” Jessika said, her eyes sparkling.

“Hey, nice” Rey said, as she followed Jessika’s excited look at the man.

“Are you ok? Did something happen at First Order today?” Jessika said in the next breath, and Rey steeled herself. She looked at her friend a long moment, unsure when to start, when she felt another hand touch hers. She looked down to see Jessika’s hand gripping hers.

“Did you quit? It’s ok if you did. I know – It’s kind of obvious that there’s more to the story you told me about Hux and then, when I saw you with Kylo Ren. There’s history there, right?” Jessika was saying and Rey felt a knot welling in her throat. She nodded.

“It’s fine, it’s better actually, because that whole office was just so-“ Jessika was saying quickly.

“I didn’t quit, not completely, I have to decide over the weekend.” Rey breathed out, slumping forward at the admission, glad the weight was off her shoulders. Jessika regarded her a long moment.

“But you should. We should, I can do it on Monday” Jessika said decisively.

“It’s such a big contract – I can try to-“

“No. Rey, no. I shouldn’t have let it get this far. I just thought that once the daily work got going, I could handle the higher ups and leave you to do your thing, independently. But they aren’t going to let that happen. So, we should quit now, before we waste any time on it, except you already worked today…” Jessika trailed off, biting her lip. She gave a yelp of surprise as Rey suddenly hugged her.

“What are we talking about?” Rose said from beside her, and the girls looked up at her, laughing.

“Get in here” Rey said, grabbing the slender girl around the waist and pulling her down beside her.

The music changed, loudly booming through the club, and for a moment, Rey felt lighter than she had in weeks.

> “Girl, you know I want your love  
> Your love was handmade for somebody like me”

“What are we doing?” Rose laughed as Rey stood up, pulling them with her.

“We’re dancing”
A couple of hours, and a few too many cocktails later, Rey hobbled back to the seats, her feet demanding a break.

She was watching her friends fooling around on the darkened dance floor when Rose came swaying over and sat with her, holding two water bottles.

“Here, Finn thought we might need these” she said, passing it over, and Rey took it gratefully. Hours of dancing and shouting over music had left her hoarse. She gulped down the sweetly cool liquid.

“Finn mentioned that Ben Solo is back in your life.” Rose said suddenly and Rey tensed a little, despite the alcohol flowing through her veins.

“Isn’t he… the one… from high school?” Rose asked carefully, and she loved her at that moment. So gentle and supportive, if a little drunk, going by the hiccups. She smiled at her as she nodded.

“How is that going?”

“It’s not. We shouldn’t speak, it just makes everything worse” Rey mumbled, and became aware of Rose watching her out the corner of her eye.

“Don’t psychoanalyse me” she said warningly, but with a tired smile.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, it’s just that… after all that, it can’t be simple. Seeing him again, interacting with him. If you need to talk about it” Rose said.

“It is simple. We shouldn’t interact or see each other again. I’m over it. Full stop” she said emphatically, and could see Rose holding herself back from saying something.

“What? Come on Tico, spit it out”

“Well, it’s just that if you were over it… I would expect it to be fairly easy to interact or see each other, you wouldn’t care.” Rose said, with her usual gentleness. Rey slumped back, letting a long breath out.

“Is it – easy?” she asked, and Rey couldn’t help the dry laugh from falling from her lips.

“No. It’s the furthest thing from easy” she admitted.

“Today, he… brought it all up. That night, graduation, my offer, god” she said, dropping her face into her hands for a moment, embarrassment flaring far and wide.

“Really? Why?” Rose asked. Rey laughed again, though there was no humour in it. She could scarcely believe it herself.

“He asked me to repeat it – the offer. He wanted to take me up on it. 6 years later” she said, that ragged laugh that she couldn’t help falling from her lips sounding more and more humourless. Rose’s eyebrows rose in surprise, her pretty mouth falling into an oh of shock.

“What did you say?”

“What do you think? I told him to get lost”

“What did he do?” Rey bit her lip, unsure suddenly how much to share.

“He kissed me” she confessed.
“How did you feel?” Rose asked, and Rey narrowed her eyes at her.

“I’m not psychoanalysing you, I promise. I don’t think I’m capable right now. I’m just curious” she said and Rey took another long pull of water as she considered her answer.

“I don’t know. It was confusing. I felt annoyed at him, furious really. But at the same time, I felt… I didn’t want him to stop” she said, and it really did feel like a confession, a dark one.

“I’m so messed up inside, aren’t I? Too broken to fix?”

“Why would you say that?” Rose asked gently.

“Because, how much of a masochist do you have to be to still want someone after all that?” Rose looked at her with empathy and Rey avoided her gaze.

“I guess I have more of my mother in me than I thought” she said with grim humour.

“She had these boyfriends, who would treat her like dirt, and she would keep letting them come back to her, move back in with us, until it would all start again, a never-ending cycling of weakness” Rey said, now concentrating on pulling the wrapper off the bottle.

“I didn’t know your mother, but I know you Rey, and you are not a masochist, and you’re not a push over either. You have an enormous heart, but you guard it well. Ben, he got inside. And you’re not the sort of person who leaves someone behind, not someone who has been behind the wall.” Rose said, and Rey tried to imagine herself as the Rose was describing.

She bit her lip, seeing Poe in the distance, looking their way. She hoped he didn’t come over, and then felt guilty for feeling that way all at once. Rose followed her eyes.

“It’s not your fault, if you don’t want to be more than friends with Poe. You don’t owe him anything. He’s a great guy, and the girl who falls for him will be lucky, and she might live a wonderful, uncomplicated life of romance, full of heart felt honesty and openness… or… she might find that there is so much more under the surface of every relationship. We all have our demons.” Rose said.

“Some more than others” Ry said darkly, thinking of that Ben and his boatload of issues combined with her own would probably break some kind of record.

“I’ve not felt like that in a long time, and never with Poe. The way I did, when Ben kissed me. It’s like he took my heart and my sexuality with him, and I’ve never managed to get it back in all this time, until now” Rey mused.

“Desire is a living emotion, sometimes it’s less physical than mental. Maybe you desire him because of the feelings you had for him, maybe because it was never resolved, it is unfinished” Rose said, seeming to turn in over in her own mind.

“You still feel… desire for him?” Rose asked, and Rey nodded, unable to deny that glaring truth. She had already talked to Rose about her lack of desire, and no longer felt embarrassed to discuss how little she felt, and how abnormal that made her feel.

“When he kissed me, touched me, I wanted more, I wanted… all of it. Like I’ve been stuck on pause for 6 years”

“Desire is a living emotion, sometimes it’s less physical than mental. Maybe you desire him because of the feelings you had for him, maybe because it was never resolved, it is unfinished” Rose said, seeming to turn in over in her own mind.

“So, how do I get over it? Because, believe me, there is nothing I want more than to be able to look at that gorgeous man, and drag him to bed with me” Rey laughed, spying Poe spinning Jessika around on the dancefloor, showcasing his superior dance skills. Rose spat out her water messily.
“I’ve probably had way too much to drink, and this is not the advice I would ever give a client. But you’re not a client, you’re my friend and I know you much better than I’d know anyone else” Rose started and Rey braced herself.

“You have definitely had too much to drink and you’re making me nervous”

“Well, it’s like, the one thing you’re not allowed to do, you want to do it even more, you know? It’s like our subconscious don’t like being told they can’t do something, and they won’t rest until they do it” Rose was saying, and Rey frowned, following her line of thought.

“So, you’re saying I should bang Ben, eliminate that curiosity and then I can be normal?” she asked, her voice rising a little toward the end.

“What’s normal? Everyone is fucked up and everyone is fucked up in different ways – a famous Russian said that, I think. Anna Karenina I think” Rose was saying, and Rey couldn’t stop laughing suddenly, at her inebriated friend.

“What I mean is that you’re not a child, you’re not some charity case needing pity sex from an old friend. You’re a gorgeous woman, in control of her own sexual destiny. You have a Ben shaped itch you’ve wanted to scratch for 6 years – so scratch it. You decide to do it for you, not for him, not for Poe – for you Rey. Take what you want, and discard the remnants. He makes you feel things you don’t with others and he wants you – who has the power in that relationship? It sure isn’t him” Rose said, slapping a hand down on the table, and jostling the glasses.

“Ok, calm down” Rey laughed as she tugged her back to her feet.

“I think we need to dance again and work off some of this seriousness” she said.

“I’m just tired of woman feeling like second class citizens when it comes to sex, men are the instigators and woman merely suffer their attentions – the aggressors and gatekeepers - fuck that. Your pleasure and your sexual agency is just as important as his. And if you can admit to yourself, without shame, that you still want him, allow yourself what you want. We aren’t talking about marriage. We are talking about you taking control of a sexual experience that you have waited long enough for” Rose was still saying as they pushed back onto the dance floor.

“Maybe it sucks that it’s still him that turns you on, and only him, but it doesn’t have to. You are not powerless, you are not weak. You never were. He should be scared of you” her friend finished, punctuating her last word by reaching up on her tiptoes and pressing a kiss onto Rey’s lips.

“What have I been missing??” Finn practically screeched from beside them and Rey laughed as he swung his arms around both their shoulders.

“Nothing, just your girlfriend being awesome”

“So, what else is new. Hi baby” he breathed, looking into Rose’ upturned face.

“Hi” she smiled back, pushing herself into his arms.

“I’m going to leave you two to it.” Rey said, heading toward Catherine. Rose’s words swam in her head. She was pretty sure that line of advice wasn’t going to end up in a textbook anywhere, but there was a part of her that longed for the empowerment of taking what she wanted from Ben physically, and then walking away. The fly in the ointment of the situation was her heart. She was certain her heart wouldn’t be able to remain uninvolved, given how this afternoon had affected her.
“Rey Rey!” Catherine called, wrapping a strong arm around her middle.

“You’re my best friend. Is that ok?” she asked suddenly, hugging her in tightly. Rey laughed and hugged her back.

“Of course it is, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because I lied to you about Ben, twice and got our apartment robbed” Catherine said, her slurred words making her a little hard to understand over the music, and Rey’s own less than sober state.

“People make mistakes” Rey said consolingly.

Now they’d steamed past midnight into serious clubbing hours, the lights were extremely low, flashes of red and blue lighting up the air, and the music seemed louder than ever.

_Have you got colour in cheeks?_  
_Do you ever get that fear that you can’t shift?_

“I love this song!” Jessika shouted, appearing with the man from the bar in tow. Artic Monkeys caressed Rey’s ear as Catherine suddenly gripped Rey’s hand hard.

“Shit” Catherine suddenly said.

“What is it?” she looked up to see Catherine looking down the club, heads taller than most around her, Rey could tell she could see all the way to the door.

“Some people I invited to the party, and some I didn’t” she said, frowned worriedly down at Rey.

“Who?” Rey asked, though it was unnecessary. She could feel him already, knew from Catherine’s apologetic expression.

“My co-workers” Catherine confirmed.

“Ladies, why do I see such serious faces? I think another drink is in order” Poe said, appearing behind Catherine, his handsome face flushed with the heat.

“Yes, take Rey to the bar” Catherine instructed, in her usual decisive manner.

“I’ll handle this” she said, and marched into the crowd, so much taller and more commandeering than all the rest. Rey felt small in there, hardly able to see over the mass of moving bodies crushing in on her. She glimpsed a flash of red hair under the neon lights on the raised seating area over the dancefloor, and turned immediately, knowing before she did what she would see.

Their eyes met in a moment of electricity. Head and shoulders above even most of the other men, a dark sentry, scanning the crowd, he was standing next to Hux, and he was focused on her, a stationary point in the writhing group around her.

“Rey, let’s go, drink time” Poe said in her ear, his face brushing close, his hand falling to her shoulder to lean into her. If she had thought Ben’s face had been hard before, it was nothing compared to the look he turned on Poe. When Ben’s eyes turned back to hers, she was already turning away, following Poe to the bar, her hand in his to avoid being separated on the dancefloor,
hiding in the crowd.

“Are you having fun?” Poe asked as they got a spot at the bar and ordered. Rey nodded, unable to keep her eyes from the mirror behind the bar and the crowd it showed.

“I was thinking, maybe we could have dinner this week, I found this little place, I just knew when I saw the menu that you’d love it” he was saying as he tentatively laid a hand atop hers on the bar and Rey abandoned her frantic surveillance and turned fully to her friend. This was something that had to be resolved, and before someone else could force a conclusion, and she decided to conclude it herself.

She smiled at him, sweetly and honestly, and then leaned forward, and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“What was that for?” Poe asked, his generous mouth curving in a smile.

“Because, you’re a great guy and a great friend. Thank you” she said. He watched her a little longer the corner of his mouth drooping eventually.

“And that’s all?” he asked. Rey bit her lip, not wanting to hurt him, but unable to go on with the constant awkwardness between them. Maybe she could have continued it indefinitely, before seeing Ben again. Convinced herself to try harder, push more, get more drunk, who knows, though they were hardly healthy ways to embrace intimacy. Now though, now that she had felt it again, now that she knew she was capable, it made the nothingness she felt with Poe all the more unbearable.

Slowly she nodded.

“I’m sorry. I feel like I’ve led you on”

“Save it Rey, your apologies are no good here.” He said, taking a long swig of beer from his bottle and bracing his hands on the bar.

“You can’t say you didn’t warn me, and that Finn didn’t warn me, and Rose” he laughed as he scrubbed his face with his hand, before turning back to her

“There’s another guy, right? The one who you could be girlfriend material for” he prodded, and she shook her head.

“No, I mean, there is a guy, but it’s not about him. It’s not about you either. It’s about me” she said, and realisation dawned as she said it, that she had just spoken an absolute truth.

She saw him finally arrive, still a study in black, his striking face awash with the colours filling the air, red and then blue, suddenly white and then darkness. He was eerily still against a constantly moving backdrop, and stood a little way off, though his intention was impossible to ignore. He had come for her

“Well, I think I better quit while I’m ahead, and leave you to it with my dignity intact” Poe said a little strained. Out of habit, he hugged her goodbye, pressing a kiss into her hair, and then was gone, melding away into the crowd, and Rey watched him go, though Ben’s eyes never left her. The music changed and a sadder, melancholier tune haunted her.

She turned to the bar, leaving him behind her, and swallowed against her dry throat. She gripped the edge hard and quickly ordered two drinks from the bartender, her eyes flickering to the mirror image of them over the bar. His eyes had still not left her, and now, he approached, slowly, taking
up the space beside her wordlessly. She could feel the heavy, warm mass of his arm resting beside hers on the counter top.

She found his eyes in the mirror, his already fastened on her. She watched him watch her.

The bartender came over and set down a bottle of water for her, and an Old Fashioned for him. The barkeeper looked to her, and she nodded to the side.

“He’s paying” she said, as she grabbed the water bottle and slipped away into the crowd, twisting her wrist as the last moment, already anticipating Ben’s reaching hand, his predictability winning over his impressive reflexes.

She pushed back through the crowd on the dancefloor, and found Catherine.

“I think I’m going to go” she shouted in her ear over the music. Catherine pulled back, looking Rey up and down in concern.

“I’ll come with you”

“No! Don’t be silly, it’s early and it’s your birthday. Sorry to be a spoilsport” she said, forcing a jovial tone she didn’t feel.

“I understand. I don’t know why they’ve come, I mean, I know why, but…”

“It’s ok. I don’t care. I’m just glad we already had fun, and since I’ll be all rested tomorrow, I’ll make brunch”

“Promise?”

“Promise”

“Rey! If you’re heading home, you don’t want to do me a favour do you?” Finn asked, appearing in the crowd, holding a worse for wear Rose.

“What happened?” Rey exclaimed.

“This is what happens when you weigh 100 pounds and skip dinner” Finn grunted, shifting his grinning girlfriend in his arms to reach her pocket.

“Rey! We kissed. Finn, I kissed Rey” Rose was saying as Finn emerged with a coat ticket stub. Rey took it from him and promised to meet them outside if she managed to emerge victorious from the coat check queue, which was already impressive.

It moved quickly though and Rey soon collected Rose’s work bag and suit jacket, as she had come straight from work. Rey marvelled that she was friends with an actual adult for a moment as she grabbed all the pieces and started to navigate the steep steps down to the door.

“Allow me” his voice wasn’t a surprise, neither was his hand, soft but firm on her elbow, guiding her down the stairs. She had already noticed that the famous Solo manners were intact, some things that are learned from such a young age, it’s next to impossible to forget. They reached the bottom and she turned, unable to delay the inevitable anymore. He stared impassively down at her, his eyes roving over her thirstily and she suddenly felt a lot more exposed than ever in her short, black, bandage dress. His eyes were locked on her, and his hand twitched at his side. She should have guessed he’d have a thing for all black ensembles. She imagined for one moment how he might have raised a hand and taken an imaginary picture of her, if they’d been different people, made
different choices. As it was, he showed no sign of emotion beside a lightning quick whetting of his lips, and his burning gaze.

“Twice in one day, lucky me” she said flatly.

“You shouldn’t leave. I’ll go” he said roughly after a long moment of highly charged silence.

“Why are you here in the first place?” she asked.

“I thought we were going somewhere else.”

“Where?” she asked, seeing his eyes slide to the side, a sure indication he was hiding something from her.

“It was Resistance, wasn’t it?” she asked, sure that she was correct.

“It’s immaterial” he said stiffly.

“You can’t keep showing up there. It’s my work, and you make me uncomfortable” she said. His head lifted at that.

“Why do you think that is?” he asked, his voice dangerously low, taking a step forward. She raised a hand, placing it squarely on his chest, and he immediately brought his hand up to press hers more firmly into his chest, his thumb ghosting a soft circle on the back of her hand.

“Stop doing that. Go loom somewhere else because I’ve had enough of it today”

“Rey, Finn said you’re taking us home” Rose said, appearing from around a corner and falling happily into Rey, knocking Ben back.

“I certainly am. I have your coat” she said, focusing on helping her drunk friend put her arms through the sleeves of her jacket as Ben looked on.

“I can drive you” he finally said.

“No”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to know my address” she said frankly. If he was offended, he showed no sign of it.

“Do you really think you can prevent it? Catherine works for me” he said and Rey resisted an eye roll. Of course, he’d probably already looked it up in HR.

“Who’s going home with you? You shouldn’t –“ he bit down his words, scowling a little at the effort.

“I shouldn’t do what?” unable not to press on that pressure point of his, the need to tell everyone what to do, especially her.

“You shouldn’t get a cab alone, your boyfriend should accompany you, it’s the least you can do for personal safety” he bit out. Rey debated whether to correct him for a second.

“Stop trying to tell me what to do” she said sweetly, pulling Rose toward the door.
“Rey” he called, a word lashing through the space between them, and she couldn’t help looking back at him. A towering specimen of masculinity, tall and broad, dark and brooding, he was attracting quite the attention from the girls coming down the stairs around him, though his gaze was unwavering in its intensity on her.

“I’d like to know that you got home safely” he conceded, and she felt as though the words were costing him. Someone used to demanding and taking, comfortably in command at all times, even of his own thoughts and desires, suddenly, powerless.

She paused a moment, and then tore her gaze from his, her eyes feeling scorched in the aftermath of his attention and pulled Rose closer, calling back over her shoulder.

“Get used to disappointment”

Chapter End Notes

Music used was Shape of You - Ed Sheeran and Do I wanna know - Artic Monkeys (practically Kylo's dream song for Rey)
In the land of gods and monsters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey was half way through preparing brunch, using a very inventive mixture of Tupperware and mixing bowls to serve when Catherine emerged from her room. Her blonde hair, usually so immaculate was a tousled bird’s nest on her head, and she had the dark smudge of mascara around her eyes from slept in make up.

“Good night?” Rey asked with smile as her roommate dropped heavily into a chair and looked a little green at the sight of the eggs, bacon and pancakes on the table.

“Is there coffee?” Catherine croaked. Rey poured her a cup in a reusable mug that had managed to survive the break in, and slide along a bottle of water as well.

“Well? Did you have fun?”

“Too much fun, fun I’m going to pay for all day, and probably tomorrow too”

“That’s the best kind of fun” Rey laughed, scooping up some eyes. Catherine let out a long deflated sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“It was the best kind of fun, until I saw this” Catherine said, unlocking her phone and opening an email. She pushed the phone over to Rey and sank her head down to rest on her arms, her forehead pressing into the table.

Rey took the phone and scanned the mail quickly.

“They’re making you redundant from First Order?” she said, reading again to get to the truth of the PC Human Resources language.

“Yep, I’m being fired”

“Made redundant”

“Please, that’s just an easy way to get rid of someone once they’re on a full contract” Catherine snorted into her coffee mug. Rey stared at the email from First Order HR.

“Why?” she asked at length.

“Why do you think? They know” Catherine said, and Rey felt a pit form in her stomach at her quietly confident words.

“Not necessarily. Maybe you’re just a terrible worker?” she attempted and Catherine shot her a contemptuous look.

“Try again”

“Maybe Ben –” Rey trailed off, unsure where to go next with that statement.
“Maybe Ben doesn’t need me there now, he knows where you are, he’s established contact, maybe, it’s a possibility. The best one, all things considered” Catherine said, taking a bite of bacon.

“Or –“

“Or Snoke has had enough of allowing me to snoop around, maybe I was getting close to something, and probably we’ll never know” Catherine said dejectedly, before flicking hopefully eyes at Rey.

“Unless…” Rey sat back, crossing her legs on the narrow chair, and narrowed her gaze at Catherine.

“Unless what?”

“Well… I left a memory stick, a tinny, tiny little one, in that complicated computer Ben uses. You practically have to contort yourself to get back there, and I was sure he’d never check it, there’s plenty usb slots in the front” Catherine rambled on, and Rey took a deep gulp of coffee to fortify her for the words that she knew were coming.

“And?”

“And… I was thinking, since you’re there, rearranging things, and doing your design work, maybe you could grab it” Catherine said, flashing pleading eyes to Rey.

“What happened to I’m sorry for lying to you and getting our apartment robbed?” Rey asked, a small flicker of irritation brushing over her at the mess Catherine had pulled them both into. She was aware that most of her irritation came from the fact that the mess involved being around Ben, which made it much more complicated.

“We are quitting the contract, with First Order” Rey explained, seeing the guilty look on Catherine’s face.

“I didn’t know, I’m sorry. Forget it, it doesn’t matter” she said, busying herself with eating. Rey watched her in silence for a moment, her mind going over the possibilities.

“You don’t need the info on it?”

“It probably hasn’t even worked. All their systems are so encrypted and the program is probably no match for First Order tech.” Catherine said, and then Rey asked the unspoken question.

“What if someone else finds it?” she asked, and Catherine swallowed her mouthful awkwardly. She coughed a little and wiped her mouth, shrugging as she did.

“It’ll be fine. It’s not your problem, I’m sorry. This is all my fault. You must regret the day you decided to let me come stay with you” she was saying.

Rey let out a long breath and stood, disappearing into her bedroom. She grabbed her phone from the charger and typed a quick message to Jessika.

She came back into the kitchen and sat down again. Catherine looked in askance at Rey’s phone as it started beeping in a series of messages.

“IT’s Jessika. She wants to know why she can’t cancel the contract tomorrow” Rey explained. Catherine froze, a painful expression of hope and guilt painting her features.
“Where is this damn thing?”

“Ben’s office. Executive floor”

“Of course it is” Rey muttered, watching in surprise as Catherine shot up and went into her room without a word.

“You’re welcome!” she called. Catherine came back out, carrying a bulky object covered in paper and tied with string.

“I have something for you”

“It’s not my birthday” Rey protested as Catherine set the large object on the floor beside her.

“It’s an apology gift, and a thank you gift. And I got it before you offered to help me out of this ridiculous situation, so.. I probably owe you another one now but anyway…” Catherine said, pushing it into Rey’s hands.

“Go on, open it”

“You didn’t have to get me anything.” Rey muttered as she pulled the paper off, and stared in surprise at the easel lying beneath. She felt her smile sneak over her face.

“Catherine, I don’t know what to say… this is too expensive” she muttered, seeing the make and model, it was a far cry above her old one.

“No, it wasn’t. That’s the thing about you Rey, you do all these things for other people, and you care about them and take care of them, and you never expect anything back. It’s not a usual thing, to be friends with someone like you – it’s only right to show appreciation” Catherine said, and Rey raised grateful and surprised eyes to her friend.

“That might be the nicest and most feelysy thing I have ever heard you say”

“I know, it must be the hangover” Catherine said, dropping her head back to the table with a soft thunk.

Two days later, she signed her name into the security book at First Order Finance, and ascended the long escalator, the very same one where she had first laid eyes on Ben. It felt like a year ago,
she mused as she walked toward the bank of elevators at the end of the hall. It was late afternoon. She was supposed to come in hours before, but had called Margot and told he she had been held up.

She had attempted to find out if Ben was around, but was firmly evaded, so she had no way of knowing how it was going to go. Ideally she would be in and out before Ben had even realised she was there. On one hand, the task ahead was a little scary, on the other hand, she didn’t know anyone more suited. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time Rey had stolen something, she thought almost fondly of her high school rainy day fund. She would just have to remember some of her old tricks.

She went first to the floor they were starting the work on, and get out her camera and sketch book. She got down to work in a corner with a sofa and table, even while knowing this work would never become a reality, she found herself getting more and more into the design. Making First Order a place that people felt human in, might remind them to be kinder in their business dealings, though she recognised that as a far-reaching idealistic notion even as she wished it were true.

When six o’clock rolled around people started to shrug into coats, throwing the mantles of work off, smiling even as they left the office. Rey kept her head down and pretended to be absorbed in her work. The tricky part was getting in and out of the executive floor without being noticed. All meetings up there had to be pre-approved.

Half past the hour arrived and she stood up, stretching out her back and neck, twisting from side to side. She packed her things into her bag, slinging its sideways across her body to minimise the bulkiness and made her way to the stairs and lifts. She had decided taking the stairs would be less conspicuous, and now she pushed through the heavy door guarding the stair well and started up. She had dressed for the occasion, in jeans and converse, a hooded top in black, which she now pulled the hood up on.

It was quite a few floors, and as she went, her footsteps echoing in the cavernous space, she thought she heard another set of steps, far below. She froze a long moment, straining to hear, but was met with nothing but silence. She was just jumpy, she decided, as she continued upwards, counting the floors as she went.

The door to the executive level finally appeared, and she stilled on the stairwell side, taking a few deep breaths. Ben might be there, and she’d have to make up and excuse for why she was there, or he might not be, and this would all be easy. She eased the heavy door open. She thought for a moment about the security cameras. Surely Snoke couldn’t be watching the feeds constantly, especially not a night. Even creepy monsters eat dinner, she reassured herself slipping into the semi darkened hallway.

It was deathly quiet, and she couldn’t see any lights shining under the doors of either office on the level. She crept quietly toward Ben's. Pausing outside, she held her breath and listened for any sign of life. After a long minute of silence, she cracked open the door.

Her eyes flew around the dark room, and saw no one. It was empty. Letting out a long breath, her pulse hammering at this point, she slipped inside.

The office smelled like him, a sudden realisation she hated. It was leathery and spicy and warm. She rounded the desk quickly and fell to her knees beside the desk, pulling out her phone and turning the torch on.

She quickly wiggled under the weighty cables and clunky desk. Catherine had explained well where she’d find it, and Rey found it quickly, with no little relief. There was a scenario she had
considered where it was already removed.

Suddenly, a noise from the hall, froze her in a half crouch, her head barely topping the desk. A flashlight swung past the frosted glass outside the office, and she pulled her head in. She held her breath as she saw the legs of a security guard pass by the door, not without shining the torch inside first.

A radio beeped, and the man moved on. Rey crouched there a good 5 minutes longer, getting her nerves under control and listening out for any other sound.

Deciding she had to make a move, or lose her chance, she crept out, her legs cramping from the tense position she’d been in.

She moved quietly to the door, and tried to see out. There was only darkness and the illumination from the fading light coming in the windows. She slowly turned the handle and stepped into the hall. She started down the hall toward the stairs, and felt a bolt of fear shot through her as the security guard reappeared at the other end of the hall, checking out the other office.

He hadn’t seen her, she realised, as she kept edging down the darkened hallway, watching the man going about his rounds. She was close, within touching distance of the door when he finally looked along the hall.

“Hey!” he shouted, bring his torch up to shine on her, but she was already moving, a blur of motion pushing open the stairwell door and pounding down it as fast as she dared without breaking her ankle. She considered just feigning being lost, but a quick check of the security footage would show her up, not to mention the incriminating usb burning a hole in her hoodie pocket.

Cursing Catherine and First Order Finance, and everyone else she could think off, she rounded another flight of stairs and kept going down, and heard the door, several floors above her now bank open.

“Hey! Stop right there!” the security guard shouted down the stairs. There were far too many floors left to outrun him, and so she slowed her steps as she approached the door into the next level, and tried to be quiet as possible as she pulled open the heavy fire door and pulled it shut as quietly as she could behind her. She knew he’d guess she had gone along a floor, but hopefully he wouldn’t know which one, and during that search she might still be able to slip out. She could still do this, she told herself as she turned and started to run along the corridor, looking back at the stair well door as she did, and completely missing the man striding the same path in the opposite direction.

She hit him at speed, and only his strength stopped them from both falling over.

“Rey?!” Ben breathed as she twisted in his arms, her eyes a little wild as she strained to look back. Of course it would be him, she thought bitterly, annoyed and relieved all at once.

“What are you-?” he started to ask and then seemed to take in her panic, her clothes, her mad trajectory from the stairs.

“Here” he said curtly, and grabbed her arm, pulled her toward a discreet door to the side. He pulled it open and pushed her inside in one smooth motion, following close behind her. She turned as she felt her legs come against objects in the dark. It was pitch black inside and her eyes strained to make something out.

“What’re you doing?” he demanded quietly, and Rey was disturbed to find the space so enclosed
that there really was no way to stand except standing pressed together. She couldn’t see him, but the smell of him, the feel of his hard chest pressing against her cheek was almost enough to make her forget the situation she was in.

“Nothing” she replied instinctively and hear his soft snort.

“Why do I feel like this has everything to do with Catherine and her pathetic attempts to get inside information on the company?” he asked. Rey looked up at where she guessed his face might be in the darkness.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about” she said stubbornly.

“Do you have any idea what Snoke will do, if he finds out you’re snooping around where you shouldn’t be?” Ben said suddenly, a completely different tone to his voice, and Rey thought it might be fear, tinting his rough words.

“I can imagine, I know what kind of monster you put on a pedestal and serve. The kind of monster you aspire to be these days, Kylo Ren” she snapped back desperately.

She could feel the wave of anger flood out of him at her words, and she felt his fingers tighten on her elbows.

“They are coming Rey, do you want my help, monstrous or not?” he growled. Her eyes hard adjusted in the dim light, and she could just about make out his face, strained and urgent, dark and bleak.

“If he isn’t what I think… then let them find me” she whispered softly, calling his bluff. His hard mask shifted for the smallest second, before he breathed out a curse, and pulled her face to his.

She opened her mouth in surprise, feeling his warm tongue instantly press in, gliding forcefully against hers. He pushed her roughly back, meeting the shelves behind her. His hands reached for hers, already in fists and pushing against his chest, pulling them sharply behind her back, and she felt her back arch, pressing her chest against his, soft flesh meets hard muscle. His hand wrapped around her thigh and pulled it up around his waist, his other hand holding her wrists together behind her, and a tremor of pure dark warmth flickered through her at the position, the urgency, the dark power she felt roiling in him. She started to push him off, her brain finally catching up enough to oppose her body’s immediate, hungry reaction, stilling as she heard his harsh whisper.

“Play along” She hesitated a moment, and felt him nip at her lips, cajoling her

“Let go” he whispered against her lips and she did, surrendering to his hands, and lips and demanding body, telling herself it was a ruse, it didn’t matter. Everything was heightened, the hard shelves behind her, the body grinding against hers as her leg stretched almost uncomfortably high on his hip, the stubble lining his jaw scraping along her chin, sending tendrils of pure, naked want sinking deep into her bones. It was all so much, sensation, feeling, pleasure, fear, that she almost forgot what had brought them there in the first place.

The door squeaked open, and a flash of light fell on them. Ren stepped back, both of them breathing hard, his eyes a molten torrent of unfinished intent as his mask slipped on, emotionless and impassive. Rey blinked into the sudden light.

“Excuse me Sir, we thought there was an intruder on the executive floor.”

“This is not the executive floor” He said, and Rey was gratified to hear a roughness to his voice that said his body was not as easy to wrestle back under control as his blank expression would
“She’s with me” he said growled, as the security guard looked hesitantly at Rey, running a hand through his dishevelled hair.

“Understood Sir” the security guard said, switching off the light and leaving, the door closely softly behind him.

The sound of the footsteps had just faded when Ben turned back to her, and her hand was moving in a hard arc toward his cheek, the sudden slap almost shocking in the silence of the supply room.

“Don’t ever do that again without my permission” she said, trying hard not to shake. The closeness of the call, the adrenaline from her flight downstairs and then the fire Ben had started in her body was all too much.

He stood silently in front of her, and she could no longer make out his face, her eyes still slightly blinded from the torch. She let out a long breath, tried to still her breathing. Her heart was still pounding in her ears and the heat stoked in her was rolling around in her veins, desperate for release.

She swallowed hard as she felt the whisper of his breath against her temple, and suddenly remembered when leaning into the curve of his shoulder had felt like coming home, a lifetime ago. She let her head drop forward a little, bringing her forehead to rest on his breast bone, laying her head against his heart.

She felt the hitch of his breath in his chest, and the ghost of his hands coming up her sides.

“No” she whispered softly, and felt the phantom movements fall away. She slowly raised her face, feeling his breath now on her lips, even though she couldn’t see him, she knew his lips were only a moment from hers.

She raised her own hands, and after the smallest flicker of fear, the smallest realisation that she might be leading them across a line, unseen, but humming with meaning and touched his face. She hesitantly ran her fingertips over his cheeks. He was so still, she realised he wasn’t breathing.

Her fingers continued their gentle discovery, sliding over his jaw and then, over his lips. They were full and soft under her fingertips, and impulsively, she rose on her tiptoes, and pressed a chaste kiss against them, before running her fingertips back over them, smoothing it away. She felt his throat bob in a hard swallow. She pressed another, soft kiss to his mouth, and felt his hands once again fight to return to her hips.

“No, Ben” she whispered against his lips, and heard him let out a tiny sigh, full of longing, even as his hands fell back to his side. Her fingers ran back over his lips and she felt him press a soft returning kiss onto the pads of flesh.

“It’s time for me to go” she said a length, stepping back, slowly shattering the bubble of memory and intimacy that had blossomed in that close darkness.

When he spoke, it was a more subdued tone than she’d heard from him yet.

“I will have to smooth over your… visit” he said with a hard-outward breath, and she could practically feel him gathering himself together, mostly because she felt the same.

“Will I be in trouble?” she asked hesitantly, thinking about Snoke.
“I’ll handle it. Wait for me outside, I won’t be long. We need to talk” he said solemnly. Rey nodded before remembering the darkness.

“Rey?”

“I’m nodding”

“Good to know. Let’s go” he said, opening the door, and late evening light filtering in broke the spell once and for all.

They rode the elevator to the bottom floor in silence and Rey struggled not to stare at Ben in the mirrored doors. She could feel his own reluctance to look at her too. She felt exposed, and she guessed he did too, like they had been altogether too vulnerable around each other in those stolen moments of shadowy tenderness.

They arrived at the lower floor, and Ben gestured her forward as the doors slide open.

“I’ll be quick” he promised as he followed close behind her. At the top of the escalator, she stepped immediately onto the moving stair, seeing Ben peel off and stride over to the manned security desk. Rey walked stiffly across the lobby, feeling as though there were a million eyes on her back, or just one pair of truly malevolent ones.

She pushed through the doors, and took a welcome breath of cool evening air, the normality of the city reassuring her after that slightly harrowing experience. Her fingers flew to her pocket and dug around for the usb.

It was empty.

She spun around to stare at the front of the building, her mind racing over her escape and her embrace with Ben. She checked all her pockets, and came up empty. She let out a ragged little laugh, incredulous and crestfallen all at once.

She spun on her heel, walking to the subway entrance without a second glance back. She jogged down and blinked back the moisture from her eyes in the bright fluorescents.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for comments guys! I love to hear what you're thinking, and it makes me feel like we are in a big, international bookclub, drinking wine and gossiping about Reylo. I feel so lucky that anyone wants to read something I've written, so thank you so much!

We are gearing up for the (extremely dramatic) end to Act II.

The rough outline of the story is Act I - Teenage Ben and Rey, Act II - The years apart and Act III - The reckoning

Also, if you're wondering about the random chapter titles, it's usually lyrics from the song I was listening to the most when writing the chapter - this one is Gods and Monsters by Lana Del Rey

Comments please to get me off on the right foot for writing tomorrow))) Also, spot the
trope - kissing to avoid getting caught, one of my favs... hopefully with a new take on it xxx
Devil's hand across my heart

Chapter Notes

Warning for updated tags - and the start of real dark themes in this fic. Please do not read if it upsets you.

Bit nervous to take the next step in the story, though it has been planned from the beginning, with the characters written reflecting their untold backstory, as I feel like the adult Rey/Kylo have been a little fluffy?

It was always meant to be dark, as it is a reflection of how I see the characters in the movies, and their backstories, just transferred into AU. I feel sure variations of this are instrumental in creating the Kylo Ren character we see in TFA/TLJ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That night, Rey dreamed again, as she hadn’t in years.

She was back in Paris, during a one month exchange at the end of her degree programme. They’d been out to dinner and now they were back at the hotel, nestled in the snowy streets of the 18th Arrondissement. Instead of Poe, it was Ben pushing her back through the door and onto the bed. Ben’s hands that were pulling the straps of her dress down as his mouth had continued to devour her, her skin prickling as her naked flesh met the air. When she guided his hand between her legs, his fingers sank into her easily, her moist warmth on fire for his touch. She wasn’t sure it was because she had no frame of reference for what came next, but at that point the dream stalled and she awoke surrounded by the smell of Ben, her hoodie lying next to her, and a cry on her lips.

She lay still, her heart pounding as she gradually adjusted to the where she was. The curtains in her room, lit with a warm sun behind them, her new easel, sitting proudly in the corner.

In that sweet place between sleep and awake, she let her mind wander back to the dream, and her own hands fell to her breasts. They felt desperate for touch, and she let her fingers trail over the nipples, gently rolling the hard buds. With the dream still so close, his hands, larger and pale, with long fingers and blunt ends quickly replaced her own, as her eyes fell shut again. She imagined him moving those hands over her, as she moved her own after his. She imagined his lips trailed down her stomach to the waist band of her shorts, her own fingers, shyly following.

Once there, she paused, unsure of how to proceed. She had heard enough about it to know roughly what to do, but her solitary explorations had been so utter flat, and embarrassing that it chased away any hope of feeling that elusive tendril of pleasure, that now rose through her as her fingers followed where her dream Ben had touched. She was shocked at her own moistness, her finger dipping lightly inside, and finding it hot and slick.

“Rey! You up?” She recognised Jessika’s voice behind the door, and her hand flew back above the covers and she cringed, her face a flaming red, at being caught.

“I’m up” she called haltingly.
“Be right out” she continued and pushed herself up. She caught a glimpse of herself in the cracked mirror, still hanging over the vanity. She looked mussed and bedded, her hair a tousled weight on her shoulders, her posture slumped and spent and even her expression was languid. It was so alien to her, she was completely caught by it, staring at herself.

“Come on Nessuno. Ikea waits for no one” Poe called through the door, and sent her scrambling for her dressing gown and a brush.

Kylo breathed slowly out his mouth and in through his nose, focusing on that simple motion, even as his arm lashed up once again, the action instinctive by this point.

He was kneeling on plastic, stripped to the waist, and the cat of nine tails in his hand was a familiar weight.

“It will purify you, boy” Snoke said, almost a purr.

“There can be no lies between you and I” he continued, as Kylo brought the hated leather strap up over the opposite shoulder, resisting the urge to flinch as the leather knots dug into the hard muscles cored across his shoulders.

It wasn’t the first time he had performed this act for his teacher, and before his eyes, but it had been a long time. After his father had died, and before, after he’d left Rey, it had been almost a weekly occurrence. At first, he had felt every lash, shame and embarrassment crippling him afterward for days, but then it gave way to relief, a soothing sort of catharsis. And then, in time, he had stopped feeling anything at all, and the flagellation hadn’t mattered anymore.

Now though, he felt every lick. He couldn’t seem to control his emotions, something which had started to feel so easy. He was nervous, nervous that Snoke would know the truth, and turn from his punishment and focus more attention on Rey. Afraid that Snoke would see his weakness and guess she was the cause.

Snoke waited slowly around him in a circle, his eyes on him as always. He felt a jolt of unease as his mentor passed behind him and he could no longer see him.

“Tell me about the girl” Snoke said suddenly, much closer than he had expected, but he resisted turning around to see. He knew better.

“Tell me about Rey”

“I have decided that she doesn’t interest me anymore. It was a childish infatuation and it has
passed” he said, the first true lie he had told his teacher in years.

There was a terrible silence in the wake of his words, and then he felt Snoke’s hand touch his hair. He tasted blood in his mouth, and realised he had bitten his tongue as he waited.

“These lies do not become you. Ben.” Snoke whispered.

“Does she call you Ben? Does she make you feel 18 again and invincible?”

“I feel nothing” he argued hotly, and knew even in that he was showing his hand. So terribly weak, he cursed himself, even after all this time.

“You feel everything, and to deny it is futile” Snoke said.

“Does she make you feel as though you could go back to when your father was alive and your mother didn’t hate you? As though you could walk in the light with her, pure and unsullied?” Snoke’s voice rose toward the end, becoming cruel and cutting.

“Do not forget your place, son. You belong in the dark, a shrivelled and pathetic thing, a pale worm of black earth. You belong by my side. We see the truth of the world, in all its shining misery” Snoke had reappeared, and Ben felt a moment of relief, before his mentor turned back to face him.

“Do you know what goodness gets you in life? A three story walk up in a forgotten part of town, the kind of place young girls go missing all the time. An apartment full of second hand junk and nostalgia” Snoke said scathingly, and Kylo did feel his blood turn cold. His body shivered as the implications of Snoke’s words spiralled through him. He felt for a moment as though he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, and brought the whip down on his back hard. It was a way he had learned to distract himself from the crushing panic he used to feel. Snoke watched impassively.

“What a display” he spat out, his disappointment evident in his contemptuous gaze.

“You will enter into an arrangement with her. You will use her body as you see fit to satisfy those animal urges you still haven’t conquered, and she will grow to hate you. In her hatred, you will be free”

“I do not think the girl will accept my offer”

“Then you shall never see her again, and in time, you will forget. Such is the way of infatuation” Snoke said dismissively before lowering his fragile body onto a chair, and gesturing to the leather implement in Kylo’s hand.

“Continue and count for your teacher, 10 more”
“You’ll never guess who I met the other day. Ben Solo” Rey said, wedging the phone between her shoulder and ear as she unlocked the doors of the Knights of Ren community hall. The air was musty, and she decided to leave the door open until the girls showed up. She walked into the darkness, eyes tracing the corners of the room, and flicked on the overhead beams. They sprang to life, along with a dull hum and she dropped her heavy bag of gear on a bench.

“Jack? Can you hear me?” she prompted

“I hear you. What did he want?” Jack asked a little stiffly.

“Nothing, I mean, I met him through work. Jessika’s company bid to re-design his offices” she said, unzipping the bag and pulling out equipment.

“That’s all?” Jack asked, and the wary tone caused Rey to pause.

“Why? Should there be something else?”

“No, not at all. I just… thought you two had history is all”

“We did. We do.” Rey admitted, taking out her wraps and starting on one hand, balancing the phone again on her shoulder. She heard Jack let out a long breath.

“I liked the kid, I really did, but then, after that night, graduation… I saw the toll it took on you, though you tried not to let me see. Something happened that night, and I don’t know what, but you were different after… so hurt” Jack muttered, and she could picture him rubbing his hand over his face.

“He broke my heart” she said, surprising herself.

“Oh, sweetheart” Jack said, and she suddenly just wanted to be at home, sitting at the dining table, tv on in the background, figuring out the parts of the old vintage radios they used to restore together for fun.

“He called here for you once, I remember now. Not long after you left for college” Jack said suddenly. Rey stopped wrapping and held the phone properly to her ear.

“What? What did he want?”

“We didn’t really talk or anything. I – I didn’t know then”

“Didn’t know what?”

“Well, it was at night, late at night, you’d just moved to the city, only a few weeks before, I remember because if it had been a little earlier, you’d have been there. He was upset. I didn’t think much about it, figured he deserved it, after what had happened between you before, so I just hung up, went back to sleep, but the next day, at school, I heard some of the teachers talking about how Mr Solo senior had died suddenly, that night”

“So, you knew that Ben’s father had died?”
“I did, and I didn’t tell you, because I didn’t want to open up all that again, and you were doing so well. I didn’t think it’d really matter, you’d hardly see him again. Though, it seems I was wrong. I don’t feel good about it, if it helps. Hanging up on the kid, or not telling you.”

Rey bit her lip as she stared at the darkened corner of the hall.

“How did he die?” she asked.

“Car wreck, I heard he’d been drinking, and it was raining… a terrible accident, not far from here actually” Jack said and Rey gripped the phone until it creaked a little under her fingers.

“It’s ok, I understand. I probably wouldn’t have told me either. Don’t worry about it.” She said after she had digested his words, as she hated Jack to feel bad about anything. She made an excuse to hang up, and sank back on the bench, letting her back fall into contact with the cool wall behind.

Ben had called her, after his father died. What if she’d been there to get that call? Would it have changed anything? Would it have changed everything?

She saw the branches that the twist of fate had wrought, the things that lead them there, Ben’s hands on her waist in his darkened kitchen when the phone rang, Hux’ nasal mocking and Ben’s unearthly anger as he’d handed her a towel and a teenager hiding in a tree seeing the high school loner and head cheerleader negotiate an indecent proposal. All these pivotal points between her and Ben had decided their path, she could guess what was down the other strings, couldn’t dwell on what might have been, that way lay madness and regret.

“Miss, I brought Mikey again” Anayah’s voice pulled her from her wild speculation, and she came back to the present with a smile, seeing the diminutive little girl dwarfed by her older brother. He seemed to shoot up every time she saw him, already tall, even giving teenage Ben a run for his money. He had his hands thrust into his hoodie pockets, and his head down, casting glances sideways at the other girls arriving and gathering on the benches, who were looking entirely too eagerly back.

She got them to run around the hall, basic drills of push ups, squats and sit ups to get them loose and warm. Then she distributed the sparring equipment and shook off her t-shirt, leaving only a training tank top, sweating already slicking her arms and torso from the humid summer evening outside. They had left all the doors open to try and stir up some sort of breeze, but it was fairly useless. Rey picked her staff up off the wall, and twirled it in her hands, adjusting to the weight and the slight slip of her moist palms. It was a basic wooden bo, completely unlike the shining beauty of the one she’d sparred Ben with, but it was hers.

“Miss? Why show us how to fight with a stick, when we are not really going to be carrying one around with us?” a student asked. Rey held her staff to her side in an open and ready pose. She stilled her breathing, reaching for the sense of focus and peace that training always gave her.

“Training with a staff isn’t just for actual combat, it strengthens your arms, helps you to understand the defensive circle, the space around you, and actually, there are more ways than you think to happen across a staff in a fight situation, kitchen broom, mop, baseball bat, a metal tube…” she trailed off as her nape prickled with the sensation of being watched. She glanced over her shoulder, and what she saw robbed the rest of the words from her lips.

As though speaking about him had summoned him, the devil himself stood leaning against open of the open doors, his black suit jacket over his shoulder, a thin black jumper on despite the warm air.

“Miss?” one of the girls asked, as Ben straightened from his pose, and made to step into the room.
“May I?” he asked.

“Why are you here? How are you here?” Rey asked bluntly, only just registering the confusion of the girls as they saw their teachers alarm. Ben seemed to take it all in though, holding his hands up non-aggressively.

“I went by your apartment, and that guy making up endless amounts of flat pack furniture told me where you’d be, once I told him my name, I guess he remembered… from high school” he said and Rey knew he meant Ben Solo, not his most recent moniker. She crossed her arms over her chest and raised her chin at him.

“You shouldn’t keep secrets from your boyfriend”

“Miss! You have a boyfriend?!” Layla called, laughing with her friends.

“OK, that’s how, now… why?” Rey said, struggling to remain unperturbed in his presence. Ben walked slowly into the room, approaching her cautiously, though just his overwhelming presence, his size and energy shifted the room, as well as the churning torrents of emotion between them.

“We have to talk, and you didn’t wait for me last night” he said, his face once again that impassive mask she was beginning to hate.

“Ever heard of a phone?”

“And you’d answer? Anyway, I seem to remember you wouldn’t give me your number” he said calmly, and Rey felt frustration rage through her.

“Are you telling me if I look in your phone, I won’t find my number?” she challenged, and his silent denial made her want to knock his head with her staff.

It was high handed and invasive and just exactly what Ben might have done in the past, if one of his controlling tendencies had gotten away from him.

“Ben Solo –“ she started to grind out, and then a motion from the corner of her eye drew her out the bubble that seemed to spring up around them whenever she and Ben were together.

Mikey had stood up, his hands out his hoodie pockets for the first time. He was looking at Ben in concern, and there was an aggressive set to his body. Rey stepped away from Ben and forced a smile to her lips. She didn’t want this to spiral out of control.

“Ok everyone, we have a surprise guest, this is Ben, an old martial arts student I used to train with” she glanced at his stiff countenance to see him only quirk an eyebrow at her assessment of their relationship.

“He knows lots and lots about martial arts, so why don’t you ask him what you just asked me” she said, and turned to sit with the girls, putting Ben on the spot, not that she’d know it from the smooth way he faced down the 15 curious teens.

“You were asking about the benefits of staff, or Bo fighting I believe?” he asked after a pause where he assessed Rey, now sitting with her chin on her knees watching him innocently. One of the girls found her voice.

“Yeah, what’s the point if you can’t carry one around with you?”

“The point, is that Bo training prepares you for almost all other forms. It has transferrable skills. It
can also help level the field between mismatched opponents, as it is also very useful for defence” he said.

“So, a woman could win against a man?” another asked cynically. Ben considered it, and then nodded shortly.

“Under the right circumstances, a woman can always win against a man, the Bo helps ensure the circumstances are more in your favour.”

“But the best defence is still vigilance, and avoiding situations where you might be vulnerable, as much as it is possible” Rey cut in. The girls were murmuring amongst each other. Rey shot an annoyed glance at Ben, suddenly picturing her students choosing to stand and fight instead of run.

“I think we need to see a demonstration” Layla called, always the ringleader. Mikey had eased back down to a careful slouch, though he looked up now, as the excitement of the girls grew.

“No, that’s really not necessary” Rey said, flushing at the thought.

“Miss! We’ve never really seen you fight, give us a good example” another girl cajoled and before she could quell it, all the girls were asking.

“It’s not nice to ask our guest to participate in sparring without warning” she said, throwing out the last hope that at the very least Ben wouldn’t agree. Taciturn, marble-hewn Kylo Ren, or whatever he called himself now hardly seemed the type to throw down in a sweaty, smelly community hall in Brooklyn with a rabble of youths, especially not in the suit he was wearing, which even to Rey’s untrained eye, looked expensive.

“I’m sure I can manage. It’s for a good cause, after all” he surprised her by saying, walking to the bench Mikey sat on and dropping suit jacket, and taking off his shoes. The girls clapped, whispered abounding as they settled in, smiling in anticipation.

“What are you doing?” she whispered at him as she joined him on the mat, after he took another staff from the wall.

“What does it look like? Inspiring youths?” he said, that same dead expression on his face, so she couldn’t tell if he was making a joke or not. She frowned at him as she retied her hair atop her head, and tried to focus.

They stood cross from other, the voices of the girls melting away as they bowed shortly and Rey shifted into a defensive stance. Ben hefted his staff, twirled it flashily, and Rey saw one of the girls fanning herself at the action. She waited as he drifted closer. The best demonstration was the male as the aggressor, so she could show how to defend, and at least make a teaching moment out of this situation that was rapidly spiralling out of her control.

Ben hadn’t stopped his martial arts study, she could see. He was sinuous grace, casual strength and piercing concentration as he moved to attack. His staff swept toward hers in a clear arch and she knocked it away. He attacked, she defended. His attacks were cautious though, almost gentle, and she realised, despite his earlier desire to spar, he was taking it seriously that she wanted to teach the girls how to defend themselves. He gave her opportunities to strike him, leaving himself open, which she did, lightly, in return. He cut in close at one point, most of the fight so far being at a distance and he ducked under her staff and grabbed her loosely around the waist from behind, his head coming into the crook of her shoulder, his own staff blocking hers. She remembered the move, so often had they practised it. She was transported by it to a school gym, so many years ago, where a lanky teenager had breathed into her neck and cajoled her to find a way out this block, an
all too common attack position for two fighters of different heights and strengths. The smell of Ben rose up to her, and she almost choked on it’s familiarity as she followed her muscle memory response to the hold. She let all her strength go, leaning into the posture, surprising the attacker. Of course, Ben knew it was coming, he’d taught it to her, but he acted like he didn’t, and let her sudden dead weight pull him off balance for a critical moment. He staggered forward as she dropped to the floor and turned, bringing her staff sharply up under his chin, stopping just in time to just rest on his skin.

Their eyes met and she found it difficult to breath, her chest rising and falling rapidly, even as she became aware of the girls clapping and cheering. She twisted around and jumped up.

“That was awesome! Can you teach it to us?” Rey felt her smile crack her face for a moment, suddenly glad Ben had shown up and enthused the students more than she’d ever seen really.

“Of course, we don’t have enough staffs, so we will have to work in turns” she was saying, seeing Ben head to the wall to put his staff against it.

“Miss Rey, how did you get out of that last grip? It looks… useful” Lily, tall and regal and so exquisitely beautiful for her young age, asked her, her eyes hungry for the information, and Rey bit down her surge of protectiveness she felt toward all the teens under her mentorship. The thought of why a girl like Lily might need help to get out of that hold made it hard for Rey to talk for a moment.

“You have to surrender” Ben said suddenly beside her. Lily glanced shyly up at him.

“The attacker is not expecting your submission. If you submit, you surprise them, take them off guard, get under their defences and… destroy them from within their circle. You take the upper hand, by using their arrogance against them” he said, and Rey was glad again for his level headedness. She was too emotional, she knew it well. Every story of the students she taught broke her heart a little bit, and she struggled to feel like she was doing enough for them.

“I am sure Master Rey will show you” he said.

“It’s just Rey” she said, as Lily left to work with her partner. Ben looked at the girls, trying not to hit their fingers together with the staffs, and laughing in the process.

“You have your work cut out for you” he said, without emotion again. Rey shot him an appraising look.

“You could help, if you wanted.” She said. Ben seemed to still for a moment, before nodding decisively.

“We’ll need more staffs” he muttered, looking at the meagre training collection.

“Hey, don’t disparage my gear, I’ve had to beg, borrow and steal to get those-“ she trailed off as the shadow of amusement seemed to pass over his granite face.

“Not actually steal, calm down. Just, you don’t know what I had to do to get this many in the first place” Rey muttered, looking away as he watched her with that intent look again.

“Actually, I just meant since you’re already here tonight. I was hoping you could have a word with Mikey, he’s new… his sister is worried about him” she said, waving a hand at the sullen teenager sitting and watching them pensively. Ben watched her a moment more, then followed her gaze.

“He’s in some trouble with old friends, or something I don’t know the specifics. Just that he’s
scared, and volatile, and he feels alone” Rey said, and her heart tremored in the wake of her words, and just for the slightest moment, she missed Ben Solo, her Ben Solo, who had been all those things, even as he had been kind and warm to her, she missed him so very much. Ben hadn’t moved his gaze from the boy, and now he moved off, nodding absently to her as he left.

She demonstrated basic blocking moves to the girls, partnering them up and running through drills, until they complained their arms were tiring, then moving the staffs onto the next eager pair. She watched Ben sit and talk to Mikey for a long while, before they both stood. Moving to the darker corner of the gym, Rey tried not to spy on them as she saw Ben lead Mikey through the initial forms of an aggressive karate set.

“Miss, is that your ex-boyfriend?” a loud voice interrupted her as she turned to focus on the girls.

“Keep practising” she instinctively instructed the other girls as she turned her attention back to Layla and her partner. She corrected their postures and indicated for them to go again.

“No, I told you, we used to train together”

“It doesn’t look like that’s all you used to do” Layla said, with a knowing beyond her years.

“Well, it was. We knew each other when we were the same age as you more or less.”

“Do you fancy him now?” the girl continued blithely as Rey schooled her face into a serene expression.

“That’s none of your business, but no, I don’t”

“That’s crazy, he’s super into you” another girl chimed in. Rey found her eyes wandering back over to the dark side of the hall, meeting Ben’s for a moment.

“Not, he isn’t, he never was” she muttered to herself.

It ended up being a good class, a very good class, and she let the students go with a sense that maybe if something happened between this class and the next, they’d be a bit more prepared to defend themselves.

Ben watched her without comment as she laid out the bag of fruit Finn had picked up at the market, a little bashed but still ok, and the remaining protein bars she’d bought.

She saw him speak to Mikey, as he flipped off the light switch by the door, before he and Anayah left, his long shadow sloping after his sisters. She grabbed her large litre water bottle from her bag and gulped down some liquid, feeling more sweaty then ever after the long session.

Ben stopped beside her, and she was relieved to see the heat had also gotten to him, his hair swept back off his forehead, curling wetly around his ears, his collarbones glistening at the collar of his jumper.

“Aren’t you hot?” she asked, caught suddenly staring as his throat.

“I’ve nothing underneath” he said simply, his lips almost smiling as she looked away, a fresh flush of heat filling her cheeks.

Deciding that was more than enough of that, Rey offered him the bottle, belatedly realising that it might seem disgusting to be drinking out the same one. She really didn’t know him now, she reminded herself. He took it without hesitation and drank deeply, those glistening muscles in his
neck sliding up and down in the dim light.

"Are you sure this is a big enough bottle?" he asked, passing it back to her. She screwed the cap back on and dropped it into her bag.

"It’s cheaper that way” she said defensively.

"What did you talk to Mikey about?"

"This and that… why he needs to be able to defend himself” Ben said, running his hand through his hair, pushing it further back from his forehead and watching Rey stuff pads into her bag.

"And?"

"I might have liked to fight in high school, but I didn’t have to… this kid, needs to” he said shortly, and Rey frowned up at him.

"What should I do? Can I help him here?"

"All training will help him, as well as having a safe place to come to. It’s all you can do.” He said, swiping the last pad off the floor and handing it to her. She zipped her bag closed and chewed her lip.

"Rey, there’s only so much you can do… you can’t worry about every kid”

"I can worry about the ones I know” she argued, and stilled as he touched her arm, cupping her elbow.

"But that won’t help them.” He reminded her, and she shook her head, even as she knew he was right.

"Everyone should have someone that worries about them” she said, raising her hazel eyes to his and losing herself in those deep depths for a moment.

"Do you?” he asked, his quiet voice almost pulling her closer to hear his near whisper.

"Jack“

"Anyone else?” he prodded, and she halted her gradual drift closer to him as his words broke through.

"My friends” she said, knowing it was not what he was asking.

"I didn’t know. I didn’t know that you called me, after your father passed away” she said quietly, and saw the slight opening of his expression reverse instantly. He dropped her arm.

"Jack just told me. He didn’t before. He doesn’t like you much.” She said lightly.

"Few do, but still, I thought, maybe one day you’d ask him about me, if he knew anything, and then, he’d tell you.” He said quietly, stepping closer to her in the low light. She felt that invisible force hum between them, always pulling them together and pushing them apart, locked in an eternal struggle of attraction and distrust.

"I never did” she breathed, he stepped in one more step, bringing his hard, sweat clothed chest against her crossed arms.
“No, you never did.” His voice was almost wistful for a moment, under the hardness of the indifference she’d come to expect from him.

“What are you doing here, Ben?”

“Call me Kylo” he said.

“I can’t” she said honestly, hating the name, and the way it perfectly captured everything she hated about the emotionally distant man who seemed to be haunting her lately.

“Why are you here?” she asked again, into this pocket of quiet intimacy that had crept in.

“I told you. We need to talk.” He said simply, dropping his hand to his pocket and pulling out the usb. Rey stared at it.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“What were you?” he challenged back.

“That was a dirty trick.” She said, the feeling of being pickpocketed while she had been losing herself in the man she had sworn to stay away from, coming back with force.

“You left me no choice. And it wasn’t a trick”

“You were just distracting me while you took it, how else was it not a trick?”

“If you think me capable of functioning on that level when you were in my arms, you give me more credit than I’m due”

“And yet, the fact remains that you have it” she spat, irritated for showing that it upset her.

“I had to take it, do you have any idea how dangerous it was, being there, having this in your possession. Snoke is not someone to be taken lightly”

“And what about you? Aren’t you the president of the company?”

“We founded it together” Ben ground out, his eyes sliding from hers and she could see he was evading.

“So, his interests are your interests… is it dangerous that you know about it? Am I in danger Ben? Am I in danger from you?” she challenged, unsure now what type of danger she meant exactly.

“I would never hurt you” he said, and she could see his honesty in his eyes, that he really believed it.

“Liar” she whispered softly, and saw him flinch at her words.

“Why are you protecting that man? Why are you allowing him to influence you? Why is he still in your life? He’s a snake, there’s something off about him-“ she started and stopped as pure anger flashed across Ben’s face.

“I didn’t come here to be lectured on my poor life choices, I am well aware of them.”

“Then do something about it!!”

“I can’t, don’t you see that I can’t. It’s too late, I’ve come too far.” He said harshly, his hands
bunching into fists at his side.

“It’s never too late”

“That’s naïve. How can you still be so naïve, still so stubbornly hopeful” he had turned from her, his profile catching the light from the street outside, and she thought she might have never seen him look so lost.

“Ben” she said quietly and stepped closer to him, reaching out and touching his fingers. His hand jerked under her gentle graze.

“You could change your life tomorrow. Get rid of Snoke somehow, change the direction of your company, do something good with the influence and money you’ve made”

He was quiet a long moment, and then turned to face her, and she could see that she had failed. Maybe she had reached him, for a moment, but if she had, it was now gone. He looked defeated and weary, so very weary.

“It’s too late for me, Rey. I’m damned. Don’t make it harder. You weren’t wrong before, to call me a monster. In real life, the monster doesn’t get to be saved. In real life, everyone celebrates the monsters defeat, and no one mourns him. No one deludes themselves into thinking that he could make amends, that he could be forgiven. That’s reality.” he said. She felt fear and sadness pierce her heart at his words, and then righteous anger rise up, anger for him and because of him.

“You’re still so afraid” she accused, as his eyes begged her to understand.

“You’re still such a coward.” He pulled back from her then, and went to collect his jacket, and slip on his shoes, his shoulders tight around his ears.

“How much easier it is to accept the awful life choices you’ve made, how easy it is to just give up, and you’re so good at it” she said, anger colouring her every word, she threw everything she could to hurt him.

“You gave up on me, when I wanted too much from you, you gave up on your mother and now you’re giving up on yourself. It’s pathetic.” she spat finally, the words hot and ugly and unstoppable as they flew from her lips, scorching vitriol in their wake.

“You are a monster, and you made yourself into one, and now you’re too afraid to stop being one” she said finally, as he stood frozen in the darkness of the hall, watching the street outside.

“Are you finished?” he asked suddenly, his voice hard. She wrapped her arms around her chest, her fury swelled, and all the violent words she had spoken falling between them like knives.

“I’m just getting started. Rematch” she snapped out, feeling restless energy and the building frustration she’d had laid like a mantle over her shoulders since she’d first seen his face only a few weeks ago itching for a physical release. Of course, it might be itching for another type of release, her treacherous body whispered, and she ignored it. She was an expert at ignoring it.

She grabbed a staff from her bag and flung it carelessly at his head.

He caught the staff smoothly and was watching her raptly. She was so sick of that sombre expression. She shifted into an opening stance, and raised her own staff.

“Fight me Solo” she said, advancing on him, crossing the distance between them in certain strides.
“Why?”

“Cause if you don’t, you’re going have a lot of bruises to explain at Monday’s board meeting” she said, whipping her staff up suddenly, attacking. He parried it at the last moment, knocking it to the side, but didn’t attack back, merely moved into a more defensive posture.

“Rey” his voice was a low caution, but he continued to block her strikes. Hi nonchalant mask was driving her crazy, her anger giving her a renewed strength and she changed her angle, and her Bo struck upward, unimpeded, and clipped him in the jaw. She sank back as he raised a hand to the red mark already blossoming on the taut defined line of his chin. His dark eyes narrowed at her, and she stared him down, refusing to apologise.

“Fight back” she growled, and then, he was moving, striking forward.

His staff was a flurry of movement, to and fro, and Rey weaved in his pattern, followed his lead, leaning into her strikes and leaning away when his out heavy strikes jarred her, letting his weight carry him forward more than he intended. He soon started to anticipate her wild style, her desperation, and countered for it, holding himself back.

It was a burning, spinning dance, and Rey enjoyed letting her anger grow more and more with each strike. But the heat of her anger was making her sloppy. She could feel the precision slipping, and she brought up her staff up a little too late, and Ben’s blow knocked her backward and her feet slipped on the edge of the mat. She fell backwards with a whoosh, her breath leaving her chest with a grunt. Ben stopped immediately, standing over her. Without pausing, she whipped her staff around, and caught the back of his knees, bringing him down on top of her, as he dropped his staff in a bid to brace the fall on his arms and avoid crushing her.

She immediately twisted on her side, hooking her legs around his hips and turning them so she sat astride him once more, but as soon as she was atop him, he was rolling them further, bringing her under him once more, this time he managed to grab her wrists and hold them at the sides of her head.

His dark gaze pinned her, and she felt a flush work it’s way up her body, from where his legs lay between hers, to his hips, pressing downwards with an intimate weight, to his chest against her own. The sudden intimacy of the position sent embarrassment and red hot arousal through her, pushing her to buck her hips to evade him, anything to unseat him and throwing her head from side to side.

“Rey, stop it, you’re going to hurt yourself” he growled, pushing her wrists further into the mat.

“I’d rather hurt you” she answered back as another twist of her hip saw him raised a little off his strong position. Encouraged she tried again, and didn’t expect the pained expression that Ben now gave her.

“You need to stop doing that” he warned, and when she did it again, he suddenly dropped his face into the crook of her neck and pushed against her with his hips.

She froze, immediately aware of the hard length pressed between her open legs, so much hard and longer than she had imagined.

“Stop” he murmured, and it sounded like a plea. Gradually he pulled himself back, transferring his weight so that his most intimate parts were no longer pressing against her own, and looked down at her, a pink flush brightening his pale cheeks. Rey avoided thinking about what had just happened.
“You need to stay away from me Ben” she said forcefully.

“Why?” he demanded, his eyes flickering between her lips and her eyes.

“Because I want you to” she said, and they stared at each other, burrowing into each other’s mind with that sentence, searching for truth.

“Liar” he echoed her earlier words.

“Why are you so angry, Rey? My girl of sunshine and love, so unable to forgive, so unable to forget me, why?”

“Maybe because you keep finding ways to insert yourself into my life!” she said.

“Tell me to leave right now, and I’ll go. You’ll never see me again. Tell me Rey, make me believe you” he said, suddenly leaning closer into her, just that hair away from touching lips, looking down at her with a storm of emotion his cultivated mask was incapable of concealing. She stared up at him, forming and reforming words in her mind, calling on that anger to do it, push him away once and for all.

“Tell me you don’t still feel it, what it was between us, something that has never been equalled, or even close. This connection, this bond” he said, taking her hand from its overhead positon and pressing it into his chest, mirroring their tender moment from the evening before.

“Tell me I haven’t always been with you, in your thoughts, even when we were apart, as you have been with me, my only constant, my companion when –” he broke off, and she was alarmed to hear his voice catch. He steadied himself and tried again.

“My companion when everyone else was lost” She dropped his gaze, unable to meet the need burning in them. He was so close, he seemed like Ben again, in this moment, and she felt knew everything he said was true.

He seemed to gather courage in her silence, and took a deep breath in preparation.

“Rey, I want to propose something to you” he said. She looked back up at him askance, her thoughts muddled and her heart wrenched between despair and hope.

“I want us to be together, as I am able”

“What does that mean?”

“I want us to come to an arrangement.” the disappointment at his words was almost crushing.

“What sort of arrangement?” she asked, pulling her hand from his chest, and attempting to push him back. He went easily, settling back to a kneeling position as she pulled her legs out from under him and watched him warily.

“You want us to date?” she asked.

“Of a sort. I have found that the best, least messy relationships are formed by arrangement.” He said, and Rey waited a beat before her curiosity won.

“What sort of arrangement?”

“An agreement of sorts, a trade. A mutually beneficial one to both parties” he explained and she remembered him using the same words before.
“Like the arrangement you had with Eliza? You want me to sleep with you, for money” she stated flatly. He frowned at her interpretation of their relationship.

“No, not just for money. I want you to agree to be mine, to do as I ask, to submit to my will” he said finally, and she felt shock at his frank request.

“In return, I would take care of you, in all ways, I would see to your every desire, in and out of the bedroom, I would be devoted to you pleasure, your happiness, in return” he said. Rey pushed herself to her feet, her mind racing.

“I know it’s unorthodox, I know you might find it appalling… but I have to ask, I have to try” he was saying quietly as she pressed her fingers against her temple and the sudden pounding that had started there.

“Why would I do that?” she asked at length.

“Because I know you feel it too, this connection between us, and it is the only way I know how to be. It is all I can give, all I am” he said, and at those words, Rey felt her heart tear open all over again.

There was part of her that was still 16 and desperate to be swept into these arms, that had burned with curiosity about the relationship between Ben and Eliza that flared to life at his suggestion. The teenager who still measured him against every single other man she’d ever kissed or smiled at, and found them wanting, that hidden and shameful part of her that wanted to capitulate. It shocked her, a dark and repressed desire to be bidden by the powerful and broken man Ben had become, even as she knew her rational mind would never allow such depravity, such weakness.

The silence stretch out between them, a long a tense moment.

“I don’t want to see you again, Ben. I don’t feel that connection, like you do, not anymore” She said, standing over his prone form, still kneeling before her. He was watching her with such heartbreak, she had to look away, stay her voice from wavering, and her will as well.

“Stay away from me Ben, this has to stop”

“I can’t. I don’t know how” he admitted lowly. She gripped herself around the middle and stared at the dark walls around her.

“That’s selfish.” She accused after a long moment, and heard him sigh in resignation.

“I know. I don’t care. I don’t care anymore” that strange wooden voice, the voice of someone who had given up on so very much, had grown used to isolation, it made her sorrow climb to new heights. This sadness was for him, for the damage he had caused them both and for the man she saw before her, cold, remote mask cracked, the gaping maw of raw, unadulterated loneliness and sadness seeping through, shrouding him like a dark cloak.

“It’s not your choice to make. You just have to accept it, like I did, 6 years ago” she said. She couldn’t say anymore, afraid her feeling would slip out, afraid she would confess how scared she was to leave him all alone, slowly descending further and further into darkness, with no tether to anchor him to the light, to goodness and love, taking her heart with him, still tied to his after all.

She stepped away from him, making for her bag, and she was relieved to see he wasn’t following. She made it to the door, the growing distance between them feeling like cord stretching to the point of snapping.
“The difference is 6 years ago, I left to save you” he suddenly said, into the dark hall and to the silhouette of her in the doorway, as she paused only a moment, before striding out into the night.

“You’re leaving me to die.” He said softly to the empty space she’d left.

Chapter End Notes

We all made it! Whew!

Let me know what you guys think! I'm nervous!

Hopefully can finish up this Act quickly, I estimate about 3 more chapters until it concludes.

Title from - Love Me Like I'm Not Made Of Stone - Lykke Li
Lights will guide you home

Chapter Notes

Wow! Thank you so much all for your support and kind comments. I was so nervous and it's hard not to second guess your creative judgements, but the wonderful support makes me feel brave enough to continue the original path of the story.

Continuing the grey vibe...

Let me know what you think pretty please!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four weeks later

Her feet pounded the pavement, the hard jolt a welcome distraction from her thoughts. Running had become a release and sometimes Rey had to remind herself not to over-do it. When she ran, she stopped thinking, and these days, she desperately wanted to stop thinking. The streets around her house were starting to be covered by a light green, golden canopy as the many trees starting to change, the very beginning of fall in the air.

She reached her apartment and ran up the steps, a last burst of energy forcing her onwards. Inside was full of boxes and she hated to think that she was losing another roommate already. Catherine had been offered a job at the same university as her mother. It was the job of a lifetime, and Catherine wasn’t sure how she’d been chosen for it, sure her mother had a lot to do with it, though it was vehemently denied.

And so, she would be moving soon, before the start of the academic year, to get settled. It was only a few hours away, but Rey felt bereft at the loss. She had lost too many people lately. Finn had moved out, and she missed him every day, and now Catherine too. And Ben, she tried not to think it, but her mind supplied the name anyway. She had found and lost Ben Solo again, in the space of one month, and she felt irreparably changed by it.

First of all, there were the dreams. Flesh against flesh and hot breath tickling her skin, his hands, so large and unwieldy were surprisingly gentle as they pressed, pinched, rolled and thrust. It was like he had awakened something in her, and now, even in his absence, it roared.

Next there was the expectation. Knowing he was in the same city as her, living his life, somewhere in her vicinity, had her looking for him in every tall backed, or broad shouldered, dark haired man. Her heart stopped and stuttered back to life every day as she thought he had returned, either unknowingly or purposefully. In her dreams, it was always purposefully, seeking her out with an irrepressible intention to possess her, and she would surrender into his demanding arms. Those were the dreams she woke up from with an aching emptiness and a sense of shame, her deepest desires revealed.
She unlocked the door, and pulled her ear buds out as she saw Jack sitting at the table with Catherine, drinking a cup of coffee.

“Here she is!” Jack said warmly, standing to embrace her. Rey moved into his arms, taken aback by his sudden appearance.

“This is a lovely surprise!” she beamed, genuinely happy to see her beloved uncle.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to get on with it, there’s packing to do” Catherine said, excusing herself from the table and going into her room.

“She’s excited about her new job” Rey said, sitting down at the table with Jack.

“She should be, such an exciting time” he agreed, offering Rey a cup of coffee from the pot on the table.

“No, I should really shower” she said. Jack nodded, and checked the time on his watch. He seemed to be struggling with something and Rey waited, knowing he always took his own time to share.

“Before you do, I’m afraid I’m not here just socially.” He said, and there was something serious about his tone that sent a chill through Rey.

“I was wondering why you were in the city” she said, with a nervous smile, waiting for him to continue. He fiddled with his watch, and then straightened the cuffs of his jacket, and after a long pause, began to talk.

Life turns on a dime.

“Well, now, I don’t want you to get worried, or upset, but I’ve come from the hospital”

“That hospital? What’s wrong?” she asked immediately.

“Well, this is where I don’t want you to say anything, or even think anything until I’m finished. Let me start by telling you that I am OK, and I am in treatment.”

“Treatment for what?”

“Cancer. It’s cancer honey. I’m sorry”

Rey felt the bottom drop out her life.
Two hours later and she was finally standing in the shower. Jack had gone, starting the trip upstate, and she had walked numbly into the shower, barely remembering to strip off her clothes, and was now standing under the spray. There was a roaring in her ears she couldn’t shake, in fact it seemed to be getting louder. She stood in the middle with her arms wrapped around her body. Despite the water falling down her face, she knew it wasn’t tears. She couldn’t cry, she was in shock, she diagnosed from a distance. Catherine had been hovering, so she’d come into the bathroom to escape. She couldn’t take her sympathy right now. She couldn’t understand how Rey felt. She couldn’t understand what it felt like to risk losing the one person who had loved you unconditionally, the only one who’d never left.

She shivered suddenly and realised the water was cold, freezing almost, and she wondered how long it had been like that. She stepped out the shower feeling a hundred years old and wound a long, scratchy towel around her chilled skin.

In the mirror above the sink she looked at herself, pale, with too wide eyes. The numbness extended further than her skin, she felt frozen inside as well.

“Rey?” Catherine said through the door. She didn’t answer, she couldn’t.

“I’ve called Finn, he’s coming over” Catherine said. Rey squeezed her eyes shut.

There was a yawning chasm inside her, it was opening wider and wider and pieces of her were falling inside. It was primal and instinctive, and she knew she couldn’t sit and drink tea with her friends. They didn’t understand. She couldn’t stand it. She didn’t want their pity or their sympathy. She remembered the child protective services office, and the worn chairs. She remembered the look on the case workers face. The girl who nobody had wanted.

“I’ll be right out” she called to Catherine, even as her mind worked furiously. There were some clothes in the bathroom, a pair of jeans and hand washed underwear. She pulled it on over her wet skin. She listened at the door and when she’d heard silence for a while, slipped out. Dropping into her room, she grabbed a grey, v-necked t-shirt and her leather jacket, both dropped on the floor, as well as her converse and sneaked her way to the door. Hesitating at the notepad stuck to the back, not wanting to worry her friends, she scribbled out a quick note.

“Need some time alone. Don’t worry about me x”

As she rode the train toward Queens, Rey stared at the others on the train, finding her eyes glued to faces, staring until the people got uncomfortable and looked away. She soon got onto a line that was as familiar to her as her own reflection, being the first route she’d ever learned.
Once she got off the train, she lingered on the street, cold and empty, unsure where to go. She saw a dive bar ahead, the flickering neon sign calling to her.

She pushed inside, and walked to the long, sticky bar. It was so dark she could barely make out the face of the bartender as she ordered tequila.

“Three shots and a beer”

“Your friends joining you?”

“Sure” she said, paying for her drinks and waiting impatiently. She took them over to a scarred leather booth and sat in the deep recess alone, drinking one shot after another, before starting on the beer.

Two more shots later, a comfortable haze was settling over her eyes, and she could see the other people in the bar. She wondered if they were as lost as she was, if they had anyone who worried about them. She wondered how long this dive had been here, and if her mother had ever sat in this booth.

After another beer, and no lunch, she finally pushed herself out the booth and weaved toward the street. It was so dark in the bar, she had forgotten that it was only late afternoon. It seemed even more jarring to see school children running past and mothers pushing strollers. She turned a familiar way and started toward her destination.

The old place looked almost completely unchanged, except that someone had painted the front door, a bright, fresh, blood-red colour. It called her from across the street. As she’d walked the neighbourhood had gotten increasingly run down around her. Chain link fences ringed scrubby gardens, dogs with heavy colours barked at her. Groups of kid and older men hung on the corners, and Rey pushed past them, ignoring comments and lewd suggestions. She tried to imagine being a real teenager here, instead of St. Augustine’s, Jacks cottage and meeting Ben Solo in a forest, if she had been one of the girls on the corner, with the too small top and loud laugh, nervously glancing at the group of boys’ opposite.

Now, the alcohol burning fire through her veins, she made her way up the sagging porch, to where the red door screamed her name.

Rey

It sounded like her mother’s voice, and it sounded like a warning.

She sat down heavily on the steps, suddenly sure she had to leave, that she never should have come. She had sat on these very stairs when the coroner had taken her mother’s body, she could still remember, the clang of the trolley steps on the railing as they had wheeled the black body bag past.

“Can I help you?” a rough voice demanded, and Rey slumped sideways trying to turn around.

“Whoa, be careful beautiful” the man’s voice was so familiar, she felt as though she was falling back through time. She held shakily onto the barrier and rose to her feet, bringing her eyes up to the man standing over her on the porch.

Unkar Plutt

Her mind supplied the name instantly, as addled as it was. Their landlord for the better part of 5 years.
“You look real familiar… have we met before?”

“No” Rey muttered, making to leave, and staring down at the heavy, meaty hand that wrapped around her bicep.

“I’m sure we have… didn’t I know your mama?” he must have read the truth in her eyes, because he smiled, a slow, lizard smile.

“Rey something, right? Damn, look at you all grown up.” He was appraising her, his fleshy face quivering with interest. He was even fatter than she remembered.

“Come on in, do you want to see the old unit?” he was already pulling her toward the unit, and Rey found herself unable to muster the strength to stop him.

She almost felt outside herself as she waited for him to unlock the searing red door, and then lumber down the drafty hallway. She walked in the footprints of her 10 year-old-self.

He stopped at a familiar floor and fished keys out his stained overalls.

“This one’s actually empty” he was muttering as he pushed open the door, and Rey felt a flood of memory sweep over her. The couch was the same, just more threadbare and flee infested than before. The curtain that separated the kitchen and the sitting room was different. There was a broken window that was letting a cold breeze in. She stood in the middle of the room, and looked down the hallway toward the bedrooms. She felt as though that cold dark wind was winding around her and pulling her to where her nightmares lay waiting.

“Take a look around” Unkar was saying as Rey started to drift slowly down the hall. She felt strange still. Numb and cold, and without feeling as she slowly pushed the door of her mother’s former room open. She once again had the impression that she was just observing her body going through these motions. It looked the same, down to the curtains, moth eaten and stained. She stared at the bed, unable to stop the memories coming.

That night, when she’d finally gotten up the courage to push open the door, against the rules without permission, and enter. When she’d seen the lump her mother had made under the covers, her first instinct, had been gratitude that she had come home and not disappeared as she had sometimes done for days at a time. She had come back. Then she had become aware of the cold in the room, and the utter stillness, and the smell. She knew now that corpses over let go off their bodily waste, but at the time she had simply thought her mother had had an accident, and been too drunk to wake up.

“Brings back some memories, eh?” Unkar was right behind her. She stiffened, glancing back over her shoulder to see him leering at her from the doorway.

“Like I said, this one’s empty, if you want it, it’s yours. You got a place to live now?” he was asking, and Rey felt that roaring starting in her ears again. She felt a dangerous and violent need blossom in her chest and realised her hands were trembling. She was suddenly 10 years old and seeing this man, pushing his way into this very room, muttering about overdue rent recovery.

“I can give you the same rates as your mom, since we were so close. Shame what happened to her” he said, as Rey walked further into the room, her eyes absently going over the items, strange to her now, someone else’s, another tenant after them.

She heard when Unkar shut the door, it’s soft click straight from the tear-stained nights of her childhood.
“Of course, we’d have to work out the same arrangement, to get the discount, this is prime real estate” he was saying thickly, and Rey heard the clink of a belt opening.

She wondered if this is what Kylo Ren felt, for a moment. This disassociation with reality, and she realised it was soothing in a way, easier to deal with than the ghost of perfume she swore she could smell, of a woman long dead.

She turned around and looked at him impassively.

“You’re an odd one, ain’t you. Now, your mother, she had fire” Unkar was saying, seeming a little taken aback by her silent staring, his hand falling awkwardly from his undone jean button.

“Oh, I have fire alright” Rey heard herself say, as she moved toward the wardrobe and the cheap metal sweeping brush she’d spied there.

“I have my mother’s fire, and then some. I’m happy to show you” she said, picking up the long pole, and deftly twisting the brush off the end, leaving her with a staff, which she swished in front of her a couple of times, borrowing Ben's swagger.

Unkar narrowed his eyes at her.

“If you don’t want the unit, that’s fine, just get the hell out.” He said, spittle flying through his ruined teeth.

“I don’t want the unit, but if you want me out, you’ll have to make me” she said, far from herself, seeing and feeling the glint in her eye, the war cry in her chest, and the hatred in her blood.

It was the righteous anger of a 10 year old girl who didn’t understand why her mother cringed when this man walked past, who didn’t understand why she’d lock Rey in her room, when Unkar looked too long in her direction, and would hide on wobbly legs beneath the bed until her mother’s door locked.

She wasn’t that little girl anymore, and she didn’t have wobbly legs.

She swung the staff at him.

An hour later, Rey stumbled from a cab on the Upper West side, and pushed cash at the diver. She had the sleeves of her jacket pulled as far down as they’d go and her hair hung in a curtain around
her face, which she kept lowered.

She glanced up quickly at the building, confirming it was the right one, and hoping her memory was as good as it had seemed to be earlier, when so many screaming memories had hurdled back to her. She pushed through the glass doors of the lobby, looking away from the security guard who sat looking at his phone. But the time he looked up, she had stepped inside the lift and was shooting up to the penthouse floor.

The lift doors slid open with slick motion and she was once again walking the halls of a different childhood.

She approached the door and hesitated a moment. What if he was home, she wondered, and then worried he wasn’t.

She couldn’t go home to her friends like this, mad with grief and fear, angry as she had never been, and wearing a man’s blood on her clothes. There was only one person she could think of.

She decided to try the code, and punched it instil emblazoned on her memory. An agonising second in which she berated herself for thinking he might not have changed it in all this time passed, and then the light went green, and the lock disengaged.

She slowly pushed the heavy door open and peered her head around the side, looking into the darkened apartment. She walked in and shut the door quietly, walking into the open plan kitchen and resting her hands on the cold countertop. The silence was heavy. The city lights, and the dark hole of the park stared up at her from the full length wall of windows.

She went to the fridge, feeling hunger pull her from her desire to look around. She felt half wild as she grabbed some cheese and bread and forced them down her dry throat, before returning for a bottle taken of a shelf, which she popped, and gulped down. She kicked off her shoes and walked to the windows, sitting down in front of them, she ate quickly, roughly, as she hadn’t in years. She didn’t know if the hunger was real hunger from not eating all day, or a phantom hunger from walking the halls of the childhood house she had so often been hungry in.

She took a long swing of what had turned out to be champagne. Picking up the bottle, she wandered down the long hallway, the cold night time light of the city accompanying her, etching her shadow on the wall beside her.

She found his bedroom, and lingered in the doorway, before flopping face first onto the bed. She breathed his smell in deeply, filled her lungs with it, and it felt so good she could have fallen asleep there. It smelled like safety. Avoiding looking in the mirror, the pain in her hands and her lip, puffy and swelling further with each minute, she pushed herself off the bed and flicked on the bedside light. It illuminated the sparse, designer furniture, everything minimal. She randomly opened a drawer and found rows of black underwear, and shut it quickly. She moved to the wardrobe next. It was ridiculously big, bigger than her entire bedroom, and she slid the doors open and stared at the work wear inside. Black, dark grey and navy seemed to make up the entire colour spectrum. She thumbed through the suits, glancing over most of the designer labels without recognition. She drank a little more, and remembered Ben’s secret box in high school, and how she had hidden in his closet that night, watched him taken his anger out on himself. She felt like maybe she understood him a little more now, as her cracked knuckles stung as her fingers tightened around the heavy bottle in her hand.

She dropped to her knees and pushed into the back of the closet. What she was searching for, she didn’t know. Maybe another secret box, to see what Kylo Ren preferred to use on his… arrangements. Just the thought sent a shiver through her.
Her hand brushed a box toward the back and she carefully pulled it forward. Breaking into Ben’s apartment and then going through his stuff, it is probably no less than he’s expect from a scavenger, she through wryly as she opened the cardboard storage box.

There was a folder with a label on it, a model airplane and a pair of black gloves. She stared at the gloves, something tickling the back of her mind, through the haze of pain and bubbles.

She picked them up and as she touched the soft well-worn leather, she remembered her Christmas present, that he was going to open alone on Christmas morning. He’s kept them all this time. She looked at them carefully, and saw near seamless patching work, where worn out fingers had been replaced and lining repaired.

It brought a lump to her throat, and she pushed them down and looked at the model plane, before discarding it. The last folder she held up and squinted at to make out the cramped writing on the label.

*Personal effects of Mr Solo, Han - Decreased*

She froze holding the plastic envelop, desperate to look inside and get an insight into the night that seemed to have broken the last resistance Ben had held against the darkness of his mentor.

Only the sound of the door unlocking and the snap of the sitting room lights going on jerked her back into motion, and before she knew what she was doing, she was stuffing the folder into her jacket’s inner pocket and zipping it closed, before pushing the box into the wardrobe and bringing the door to a close just as Ben appeared in the doorway.

His guarded look fell away as he stared at her in shock. He was wearing a white shirt, and it was the lightest thing she had seen him in, with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, and grey trousers. He was staring at her with the most unsettling mix of disbelief and something else, something Rey struggled to name, but it seemed like hope.

“Rey” he breathed, moving toward her as she stood, flagging in front of him. His eyes swept over her, and his face went whiter than usual with tension. He grabbed her hands, and then pushed her jacket off her shoulders, taking in the fine spray of blood that decorated her chest and neck, his fingers frantically checking her over.

“What happened??” he said roughly, turning her around.

“Where are you hurt?” he demanded, a frantic note entering his voice. She just stared at him, shaken by the weight she had felt lift off her shoulders at the sight of him.

“Rey, can you hear me? I need to know where you’re hurt sweetheart” he was saying, now cupping her face.

“It’s not mine” she finally got out, and saw his profound relief.

“I – I did something terrible” she continued, and slowly, like a slow-motion collapse of a card house, sank to her knees, taking him with her, as he shifted to support her weight.

“Tell me, whatever it is, it doesn’t matter” he said, and suddenly pressed her head against his chest, his mouth moving in her hair.

“Tell me Rey”

“He – he was our landlord, he… I went there, I went back-“ her thoughts were a jumbled mess and
she struggled to articulate what she needed him to do.

“He’s… he needs help” she finished. Ben looked at her a long moment

“Are you sure you want to help him?” he asked. She looked into his eyes and saw the truth of his feelings for her for a moment, that he would help her do whatever she wanted with the man who had wronged her, without a second thought. There was something twisted and beautiful about that kind of emotion, even as it was terrifying and heart-breaking.

“Give me the address, I’ll take care of it” he instructed, taking out his phone from his pocket, seeing her guilt and worry in her eyes.

“Will you be ok here?” he asked, as he held the phone to his ear. She nodded, and he reluctantly rose and walked to the en-suite bathroom, banging around in cupboards and running the tap, speaking in a low tone she couldn’t make out.

He returned quickly, and pulled her up carefully, his touch as gentle as if she were made of glass.

“You need to take these off” he murmured, his hands pausing at the edge of her t-shirt. She nodded and lifted her arms, feeling the weight of the day fighting her. Next, he unbuttoned her jeans, the knees almost soaked through with dark blood, nearly invisible under the dark denim.

He pulled her jeans carefully down her legs, and she held onto his shoulders, as he pulled one foot out and then the next, steadying her until she was balanced again. He stood and pulled her over to the bed, saying nothing about the blood stains from when she’d thrown herself down earlier, hardly visible on the black sheets. She had never imagined that if she were to be standing in front on Ben in her underwear, in real life, and not only in her dreams, it would feel so non-sexual.

He went to the bathroom and returned with wash cloths and a glass of warm water, as well as a first aid kit. He sat on the bed next to her and wet the towel, holding it toward her neck.

“May I?” he asked, and she nodded. She had felt so unattached and vacant the whole day, and now, sitting here before Ben and in the echoes of their past, she felt her consciousness start to return to her body. He wiped the blood away across her face and neck, down her arm. He then laid a warn compress on her torn knuckles, all the while, she watched him in silence. She couldn’t stop taking in the tiniest details, like the way his eyelashes were so long they almost rested in his cheeks when he looked down, and that there was a dark freckle just above his lip.

“Ok, let’s see them” he murmured, lifting off the wash cloth and frowning. She felt a wave of tiredness as he started to clean the torn skin, and closed her eyes, swaying a little.

“Almost done” he murmured, his voice close and warm and more comforting than she could have anticipated. She felt him touch her cheek and gasped with pain.

“Motherfucker” he swore lowly as he held another warm, moist towel up to her swollen mouth and split lip.

“He’ll pay for this” he promised darkly, and she opened her eyes to meet his furious gaze.

“He has” she said, her own darkness staring into the face of his. And there was darkness there, she had felt it, licking through her veins like black fire as she had beaten Plutt down after he had landed a lucky punch. He hadn’t gotten up again.

“That’s my girl” he said with a quiet satisfaction, and she felt sick and proud all at once. She closed her eyes, feeling her head swirl again.
“Have you eaten? And no more of that, not on an empty stomach at least” Ben was saying moving the upended champagne bottle and urging her back into the bed.

“Don’t tell me what to do” she said grumbled, letting him put her under the covers, and watching him disappear from the room. She closed her eyes, and felt sleep beckoning, the kind of flat out deep tug of exhaustion, and, finally safe, she let it take her.

Chapter End Notes

One of my favourite things about Rey is her fearlessness of the dark in TLJ, and her refusal to play the damsel in distress, as well as how kind of blood thirsty she is in the throne room scene - girl got rage and she's not afraid to show it... and I see it as another connection between them, she takes no prisoners, and he loves her for it.

This is a two parter, kind of... but had to cut as it was getting super loooonnggg.

xxxx

title- Fix You - Coldplay cough *foreshadowing*
Lay your head where it burns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even though it hurts
Even though it scars
Love me when it storms
Love me when I fall
Every time it breaks
Every time its torn
Love me like I'm not made of stone
Love me like I'm not made of stone

Lykke Li

The sound of rain splattering against the window was the first thing she registered as she woke slowly. She was disorientated to begin with, staring up at the ceiling. It was dark, and the clock read 3 am.

Gradually the previous day ebbed back and Rey winced as she felt her cheek ache. She remembered Unkar Plutt and the house with the red door. She remembered the feeling of her hand hitting slack skin, again and again, even when he was no longer fighting back.

She remembered Jack.

She felt her gorge rise at the throat, and threw herself out the bed, and staggered toward the bathroom, realising she was still drunk and off balance as she gripped the toilet and waves of sickness passed over her. Gradually it passed, not by much, but enough to sway back in the direction of the bed. She stopped as she entered the room, seeing a dark silhouette in the doorway.

“Rey?” Ben’s voice was gentle but alert, and she had the impression he hadn’t been sleeping. At sound of his voice, a large sob erupted from her chest, unexpected and painful. He took a step toward her, moving into light from the window, the subdued moon shining on him, and she felt the first tear fall. She had been so frozen inside, so removed, and now, she felt that paralysis thawing and it hurt. She dashed away the hated wetness, not ready to let herself cry, because if she started, she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to function.

Bens stopped in front of her, and she felt as though her body had forgotten how to move, how to breath, under the weight of emotion, pressing down to be let out, demanding release.

“Arey, are you alright?” he asked, as she stood, turned in on herself. She felt him pull her against his chest, and it was warm and solid. She held onto his sides, something to anchor her against the buffeting emotions, howling around the room at hurricane speeds, like they stood at the eye of the storm, and Ben’s body kept the winds from her.

A tremor of fear shot through her. She didn’t want to feel like this. She wasn’t ready. She couldn’t
face it. Why had she come here? What was going to happen to Jack? She couldn’t stop thinking about how soon she might be alone again, and felt crushing guilt at her selfishness. She hated herself and her weak reaction and every time she closed her eyes, she saw the pipe arc a fine trail of blood flying from the end, and the sound it made on Plutt’s skin.

Before she knew what she was really doing, she ran her hands up to Ben’s face and pressed her own, miserably frozen, against his, her lips attempting to kiss through that strange paralysis, to let the heat of his skin burn away her numbness. He stilled under the movement, and then leaned away.

“Rey—” he started, and the last thing she wanted was to hear him talk and ruin everything. She had to get out of her own thoughts and this seemed like the most immediate way. She rationalised that she was using Ben as a distraction, because she wasn’t brave enough to deal with her emotions, while her heart just looked on with pity. Her heart whispered that maybe she needed his affection, the proof of his feelings for her, to be brave enough to face herself. Maybe she needed him to remind her that she was someone worth loving.

“Shhh” she breathed and touched his lips with her finger. She ran her hands down his chest, feeling her tears subside as she put all her focus on touching Ben. Her fingers reached the hem of his t-shirt and she quickly tugged it up, attempting to pull it over his head.

“Rey, what are you doing?” he murmured, stepping backwards, his t-shirt caught up his stomach, she’d been unable to removed it any further without his help. She ran her hands down the taut planes of his abdomen, fingers following the smooth curves of hard muscle. She lowered them to his belt, pulling at the metal buckle. He caught her hands suddenly, and held them tight, leaning down a little to see into her eyes. His expression was far too full of feeling and emotion, and her resolve to hold back her tears cracked a little, moisture gathering behind her eyes

“Jack. Jack has cancer.” She finally whispered, a murmured confession and a weight shifting in her soul. Ben watched her a moment longer, his eyes filling with pity, and it struck Rey that someone who thought himself so incapable of love shouldn’t be able to look at another human being with so much feeling.

“I’m sorry. He’s a good man” Ben said, his quiet words full of implication, that far worse men get nothing in return and it’s not fair.

“Has he just found out?” he asked after a moment, in which Rey watched numbly as he used the hem of his t-shirt to gently wipe her stinging eyes.

“No. He’s known for over a year” Rey said, feeling that darkness from before threaten to overcome her as she delved into the memory of what Jack had said.

“Treatment?”

“He already started. He didn’t want to tell me, until he had news…”

“Why is he telling you now?” Ben asked, cutting straight to the heart of Rey’s fear.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say” she said.

“I didn’t ask the right questions, I didn’t – say the right things” she said, looking up at Ben in the shadows and moonlight.

“I don’t want to feel like this anymore. I’m afraid and so… angry” she murmured, again, confessing the doubts of her soul to the one person she knew wouldn’t judge her.
“You need to feel Rey, that’s who you are” he said, brushing her hair off her forehead. She stared at him, hungry suddenly. She wanted him to distract her and blot out the pain in her chest, as heavy as an axe, shattering everything in it’s wake.

“Make me feel something else.” She said, suddenly pushing her hands up his shoulders and into his hair. He stiffened against her, but the hot feeling of his skin chasing away the chill in her bones felt too good to stop.

“Rey-“ she shushed him with her lips, and pressed her body harder against his. She was spiralling, a calm voice warned her deep in her mind, but right now, she couldn’t stand to be inside her own head, and she was looking for an escape.

“Please. I can’t stand it” She admitted, trying to pull his face back to hers. His lips evaded hers, though she pressed small kisses to the corners of his lips, and sighed against his skin,

“Please, Ben… help me.”

His arms came up around her, and she was crushed into his chest, hard enough to forget how to breath for a moment, as his face burrowed into the crook of her neck, inhaling deeply.

“Rey” his voice was rattled as she reached around her back and attempted to undo her bra clasp, deciding that maybe that would speed him along a little.

She felt his fingers close over hers, and jerked her head up.

“Rey. You’re upset. You need to eat and sleep” he said, and she felt embarrassment followed by shame wash through her. She shook her head vehemently.

“No, I don’t. Don’t tell me what to do… just… help me” she said, turning her attention back to her bra clasp. She backed away from him, and returned her hands to her bra, practically ripping at the back. She drew the straps down her arms and tossed it aside, stepping back toward him as she did. She reached back up to his face, pressing her chest into his, and was rewarded with seeing Ben close his eyes a second, as if in pain. She grabbed one of his hands and placed it boldly on her breast.

The shock of the contact sent a heat burning through the broken, numb wasteland inside her chest. It felt so good just to focus on that feeling, and forget everything else. Ben had gone so still, she looked up to find him watching her with a reverent sadness that she thought she might never be able to forget.

“Stop. Don’t look at me like that… just… get on with it… do what you want to do” she ordered, the words sounding broken and disjointed even to ears.

“Bind me, torture me, whatever it is that turns you on, I give you permission – do all of it, give me your worst. Hurt me Ben – I want you to” She said.

He frowned at her words, seeming to recoil from her as though she’d struck him, as he gently pulled his hand away from her breast and it fell to his side.

“I’d never want to hurt you”

“Isn’t that exactly what you want with your arrangement? You hurt me, and I let you”

“That’s what you thought I wanted?” he asked, his words hollow in her ears.
“You really do think I’m a monster” he said quietly, a bleak expression blossoming on his face.

“What do you care if I do? What does it matter?? Just do something! Do something to take away all this… feeling” she cried, tearing at her chest a second.

“No Rey, I can’t. I won’t.” he said quietly, and she felt anger surge, born from the fire of her grief, sharp and hot.

“Great. The cold and vicious Kylo Ren choses now to develop a conscious, how terribly convenient.” She said, crossing her arms over her bare chest. Her anger and shame, confusion and sadness a living thing now in the cavity where her heart used to be. And then another thought bloomed, and it cut her to the quick.

“Or maybe, you really never wanted me after all. This makes two times Ben, two times I’ve offered you everything I had, and you’ve not wanted it” she said, hating her voice and her thoughts but unable to stop them pouring out. All insecurities she’d harboured over the years spilling out.

“You are so wrong. You have no idea-“ he drifted off, and shoved one of his hands through his hair, leaving it in disarray.

“Then show me!!” she shouted at him, her throat hoarse from the day before. She couldn’t stop the violent urge she had to shove his chest, and she did, pushing him backwards.

“I am. I am showing you. I’m doing it right now!” he shouted back, stepping closer to her and grabbing her upper arms, and she relished the bite of his strong hands pressing into the muscles there.

“No, you’re not. You’re making my decisions for me, again. I hate you!” she swore hatefully, feeling the bubbles of emotion she had been trying to avoid start to simmer in her chest. She pushed him again, and he swayed backwards.

“You are not yourself, and you would regret it.” He ground out, trying to hold her still as she thrashed around in his arms.

“Stop pretending that you care. I hate you, I hate you!” she cried, her voice breaking, landing a hard thump on his chest, and then another, feeling the first hot tears streak down her cheeks, afraid that now they had started, they’d never stop.

“You’re pushing me away, when I need you most. You’re leaving me alone, everybody leaves me” she accused, as new tears started to drip down her face. She didn’t know if she was speaking to Ben anymore, as Jack as well, or even the ghost of her mother, freshly rendered from her visit to the past earlier.

“No, I’m not. I’m not going anywhere” Ben growled, and then, seeing her face, the wild look under the tears, as she made to turn, grabbing her against his chest, and pulling her back against it, crushing her to him.

“And neither are you” he said in her ear. She swore at him and kicked, she tried to break his strong embrace. She raked her nails down the parts of his arm she could reach, and all the while, the pressure in her chest was rising, and rising.

She spat ugly words at him, and called him names. She cursed him and mocked him, and still, he held on, silently. She stamped his feet and tried every move she knew to throw him off, even managing an elbow to the gut, but he merely grunted and held on.
She felt when her strength, the spikey manic feeling that had been burning in her veins all day started to ebb away, spent. She had exhausted herself fighting him, and herself.

And after that strength failed, the tears came.

She cried and cried. She cried until her cheeks cracked with salt and snot had run down her chin, spittle collecting on the corners of her mouth, frozen in a snarl of fear and sadness. She fell slowly down, still cradled in Ben’s arms, ending up sitting between his legs as he lent against the bed, his chest against her back, his strong arms no longer restraining, falling to the sides a little, and she missed the warmth of them immediately. She picked one up by the wrist and wrapped it around her, hiding her face in his forearm.

“Hold me” she had barely finished saying when the other arm came back around her, held her firmly, stroked her hair. She cried until all that was left inside was a dull ache and an emptiness of profound weariness. She felt her head falling forward, as though drugged, such was the tiredness.

Ben was moving her then, standing and picking her up, holding her against his chest. He put on her down on the bed, drawing the covers over her. She felt him wiping her face for the second time that night, the salt wicked away, and a feeling of fresh, cleanliness in its wake. She couldn’t seem to find the energy to open her eyes.

“Go to sleep kid, I’ll be here when you wake up” he murmured in Ben’s voice, so softly she might have imagined it and the last thing she felt was the soft caress of his hand on her hair, and then, she was gone.

He watched her sleep. He couldn’t seem to help himself. He told himself he didn’t want her to wake up and be alone, but it seemed like only half the reason. He watched the covers rise and fall with her even, deep breathing, watched the moonlight work its way across the fan of her hair on the pillow. He relished the opportunity to stare at her face, to commit her adult features to memory.

He mused on what a dramatic departure his day had taken, from what he had expected, what he had come to expect since he’d last seen her.

He was dealing with the fall out of challenging Snoke on the drug trials. In the end, he had declined to sign off on them. Snoke called it a childish display of independence and allowed that perhaps Kylo might feel the need to assert some of his natural dominance in their relationship from time to time. After that conversation, he had had to go to his training room and slash through the practise dummy, until his stomach stopped heaving and his hands stopped shaking.

He had expected to come home to the quiet, empty dark, the same one that lived inside him. He would eat something, alone, and then go to bed alone, and he would try not to think about her. Sometimes, when it proved particularly hard, he would sleep in the bed she had once, in the spare room, or just wander the halls, looking down at the night world below, knowing she was out there somewhere, a bright encompassing light, drawing him to her, only to burn him alive in her fire. Sometimes he would meditate, something he had tried to do over the years, to further his martial arts practice, but, as always, found it difficult to escape the voices in his head.

Rey moved in her sleep and his hand was already moving back toward her shoulder. He rested it
lightly on her, and his touch calmed her.

Instead, he’d seen a light on, and had hardly dared to breath, moving toward its source. There was only one person who’d known the code to the house, the very person he had never changed it because of. And there she was, terrible and beautiful, sprayed with blood and violence, her face so open and full of feeling he could hardly stand it.

Rey had darkness, he’d always known it, felt it’s twin answer in his soul, and yet she was never consumed by it. Her light kept it at bay, she wasn’t afraid of it. Tonight she had faced the poisonous feelings inside her and exorcised them. She had faced her demons and now slept the slumber of a righteous warrior, returned from the battlefield victorious.

What had happened with the man, in her childhood home, she wouldn’t forget. Whether she could forgive herself or not, whether he deserved it or not, Rey wouldn’t forget her part and her actions. For himself, he would have happily let the man die, or even helped him to do so, but it wasn’t his choice to make. It was Rey’s and he knew that she would take it on her soul, and he wouldn’t let his darkness taint her.

And then after, in that moon-kissed half light, she had pressed herself into his arms, her whispered words and pleas, the feel of her skin under his, the gentle curve of her breast in his hand. The worst part of him had raged to take what she was so foolishly offering and plunder and gorge until sated. It sounded like his teacher, whose voice was starting to sound more and more distinctive, after so long being unable to tell it apart from his own.

He stared down at her, his heart full of questions. Did she still need him, as he did her? Did turning him away rend her soul in two, is it had his, 6 long years ago? Had she felt whole since? And the question that scared him the most. Could she accept the man he was now? The man who wore a monster’s mask, to hide his past from himself? The boy who knew he was too broken and sullied to ever be worthy of her. Could he come back from that place he’d carved himself? He had no idea. For himself, it seemed too daunting and exhausting a task, Rey was right, it was much easier to let himself drift away into that warm dark, and let everyone he had ever hurt forget him.

The night wore on, turning gradually into a grey morning, and Rey slept on, her nightmares kept at bay by the silent guardian by her side.

When she awoke, it was to her stomach rumbling hungrily. She pulled the covers back, and saw they had somehow been changed to white ones, clean and crisp. The clock read 11 am. She stood carefully, feeling hunger grip her stomach and a powerful headache set in. There was a glass of water on the bedside table, and she drank it gratefully. She looked around the room in the grey light of the rainy day outside, filtering its dim light over the clean and bare surfaces.
There were clothes laid out on a chair, and she pulled them on gingerly, deciding they must be for her, given they were the only things out of place in the room. Long, fine knit charcoal jogging bottoms and a hoodie. She rolled the waistband of the soft joggers and pushed the long sleeves of the hoodie up to her elbows, zipping it to the neck.

She visited the bathroom, and looked at herself in the mirror. Her cheek and jaw were a patchwork of purples and blues, with her spilt lip the finishing touch. Her hands were a mess, but it was mostly hidden under Ben’s careful wrapping. She pulled her hair out of the neck of the hoodie and twisted into a knot on her head, and took a deep breath, steadying herself.

Finally, barefoot, she padded out, through the bedroom and peeked around the doorway of the bedroom, into the kitchen.

She saw him immediately, his back was turned, a grey shirt stretched across his broad shoulders, tapering down to his waist and his long longs in joggers that matched her own, but black. He was cutting something, which he turned and threw into a sizzling pan. The smell of onion and mushrooms wafted to her, and her stomach cramped again.

As though he had sensed her, he turned to catch her lingering in the doorway.

“Morning” he said lightly, a hint of a smile brushing his lips. His hair was mussed around his face, and she imagined that in a different world, where Ben had never run from her, or maybe even one where she was brave enough to enter into his agreement, that she would pull on the unruly curls and tug him down to kiss him good morning.

Instead she shifted her eyes away from his to her most pressing concern. Food. The table was set for one, and it was fairly groaning with dishes. She stepped forward hesitantly.

“Please, sit, it’s for you”

“All of it?” She said, raising an eyebrow at him. She could see fruit, peeled and sliced, crispy bacon and pancakes, as well as flaky chocolate pastries. If she’d been hungry before it was nothing compared to now. She closed the space quickly between the doorway and the table, pulling out a chair and sitting on it, crossing her legs on the narrow space and looking over the offerings.

“You’ve been busy” she remarked, taking a sip of juice to start with.

“Well, you’re my guest” he said, turning back to the cooker. She ate a piece of bacon and found the salty crispness fill up some space in her cavernous stomach. She took a few pancakes, and some more bacon, telling herself she’d show restraint, and started to eat. Concentrating on the food, she didn’t even hear him approach, until he put a plate down with a steaming omelette beside her.

“Protein will help” he said simply, dropping into a chair across from her, and she realised the pancakes and bacon were already gone. She moved onto the omelette, gesturing to him with her fork.

“You are going to eat too, right?”

“I already ate earlier” he explained, taking a sip of a black cup of coffee. She nodded absently, chewing a tender piece of mushroom.

“Good omelette” she remarked, and he looked ridiculously pleased for a moment.

“I didn’t expect you to be able to cook, I thought you’d have a housekeeper or chef or something” she said as she ate the last of the eggs, and sat back, taking a long drink of juice.
“I’m not really a fan of having people in my space” he said, and she was struck by how the soft light from the window behind him was bringing out mahogany hints in his hair. What he had said suddenly registered. She picked up her coffee, and finally ventured a sip, waiting to see how it sat in her delicate stomach.

“Are you taking about me?” she asked curiously. He let out a laugh at her directness.

“Do you think I’m talking about you?” he asked in return, and she thought she could get used to the hint of humour she could see in his eyes.

She shook her head decisively, and it brought a genuine smile to his lips, and Rey froze for a long moment, utterly captivated by it. Unbidden, she raised her fingers to frame her eyes and clicked the imaginary shutter.

“The great and terrible Kylo Ren smiles. Never seen before” she whispered. Her words seemed to freeze him in place and then his smile shifted, into something wistful and sad. She held that gaze as long as she could, while the memories of the previous night crowded back. His hands on her skin, his lips on hers, as unwilling as they’d been. The thought made her look toward the table, and broke the moment.

She was full, she hated to admit it. She eyed the pastries, and they looked sinfully good, probably form some expensive French place. She hated to waste the opportunity to have one.

“You know, if you would reconsider my proposal, I could make you breakfast every morning.” He said, and she looked up at him surprised. He watched her reaction raptly, and as she failed to respond, he sat forward, no doubt hoping to press his advantage.

“I understand I didn’t approach this right last time, I didn’t explain enough, I didn’t offer you enough” he was saying as Rey struggled to contain the nerves that were springing up in the wake of his words.

“Ben-“ she started.

“No, don’t. Just hear me out” he said. She shifted back on the chair, crossing her arms, and feeling that headache coming back, a thousand times stronger.

“It’s not what you think, submitting to me. I would never hurt you, I would take care of you, like I did last night. You would be the one, in control. I could only do to you, what you allowed.”

“And what would you get out of that?” she asked, genuinely confused by his urgent words.

“I would get to have you.” She frowned at him, his honest expression showing her how very much he wanted that.

“Go on” she said, trying to imagine what he was proposing. He took a deep breath, and seemed to gather his thoughts.

“I don’t want you to be unhappy, or feel afraid of losing Jack. I would like you to allow me to pay for his medical treatment. The best money and my influence can buy. The best doctors, tests and treatment available” he said, and she stared open mouthed at him.

“And in return?” she said, when she’d recovered her voice. He swallowed hard.

“We will move Jack into your place in Brooklyn, or a new place in the city, if you wish, so he isn’t travelling for medical care and you will move in here, with me”
She stared at him. A pink tinge crept into this pale, sculpted cheeks, and he dropped her gaze, starting to gather up the empty plates in front of them.

“And?”

“And – be mine. Submit to me, agree to try at least” he muttered. Her headache pulsed in her temples.

She pushed away from the table and went into the kitchen, feeling embarrassment and something else, something hot and slippery, creeping through her stomach. She pulled open a cupboard, and then another, before turning to him in frustration.

“Pain killers?” she asked. He rose, and approached, reaching to a cupboard over her head and opening it, taking out a box of paracetamol. Rey tried to focus on practicalities, as apparently, they really were having this conversation.

“Submit to you sexually?” she asked suddenly, looking up at him, as he stood over her, and the question stilled Ben’s hands, as he lowered the box to the counter behind her.

“Yes, sexually, but not only sexually” he said quietly, his eyes moving over her face, between her lips and her eyes.

“In all things. Let me choose the best things for you, give me that power over you. Agree to surrender yourself into my hands” he murmured.

“Why? Why do you need that? Can’t we just be ourselves?” she asked, watching as his hand rose to her cheek, where it lightly stroked the skin there, before dropping to the zip of her hoodie, where he then trailed his fingers down the front as though opening it to the air, lighting fires in his wake.

“That is me Rey, it’s the only way I know”

“Let’s learn a new way, together” she said, and her words brought a look of pure dejection and misery to his features, even while Rey surprised herself at the question. When had Ben become someone she could trust enough to consider being with again? She had no idea, it had crept up, and then solidified last night.

“I can’t, I just can’t, not yet, this, this is all I’m allowed” he said it quietly, like a whispered prayer.

“Allowed by who?” she asked, his sadness pressing down on her. His weary eyes couldn’t meet her gaze anymore, and he dropped his hands from her shoulders, and his forehead to meet the top of her head at the same time.

“Please” he said into her hair, as she raised her hands to cup his face.

“I’m sorry Ben, I can’t, and you know that. It’s just… not me. I’d fight you at every turn”

“I don’t care.”

“I do. I don’t want to fight with you anymore. I’d just resent you, and start to hate you –“

“Not if you’d trust me, if you trusted me enough, you’d be happy. You’d let me take care of you”

“Why would you want to do that?” she asked, a little exasperated.

“You can’t understand, it’s just something I need. Someone like you couldn’t never understand, what it means to be… broken, and have no strength to fight it. You can’t understand being too tired
“to fight, it comes so naturally to you” He said roughly, and the bleak expression on his face broke her heart a little.

“You’re right, I don’t understand it. I never understood why you’re so determined to believe you are broken, I never have. If you want to not be broken, then stop being broken” she said. She stared at him, willed him to see himself as she saw him.

“Forget the past, let it die, isn’t that what you told me” she held him gaze communicating all her emotion, all her belief in him, all her hope for him. He flinched under that gaze, and she felt him pulling away.

“Somethings can’t be forgotten” he said, his face closing in the wake of the words, and just like that, the moment passed, even as Rey fought the urge to beg to know what things he spoke off. She knew he wouldn’t tell her, perhaps couldn’t even.

“This is all I can offer, all I am. It’s either enough for you or it isn’t” he said, stiffly, averting his eyes as she pressed her hand to his heart for a moment, but felt his distance, and with reluctance, pulled her hand away and slipped out from him, grabbing the box of painkillers, and popping two out, quickly swallowing them with juice from her glass.

“I care about you Ben, but I can’t willing enter into a relationship that I don’t understand for reasons you won’t tell me. I can’t be bought either. Jack’s already in treatment, and it’s the same treatment he’d be getting if I hadn’t met you again. I have to believe it’s good enough.” she said.

“My soul is not for sale, not even to you” she said finally,

She turned away, feeling disappointment fall heavily on her shoulders. She went to the bedroom, and slipped on her shoes, finding her keys and wallet beside the bed. Her clothes were nowhere to be seen, except her leather jacket, probably in the wash. She didn’t care. She didn’t want to see them again, grabbing her jacket, and slipping it over the hoodie.

She walked back through to the kitchen and caught sight of him standing like a stone where she’d left him, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“I’m keeping these” she called, hoping to make him turn, but there was no response. She went to the door, and pulled it open, looking back to see he had turned away from her, and was now looking at the rain leaving long trails down the windows outside. His shoulders were tense, his arms banded with restrained strength, and she wondered what part of his apartment would bear his wrath once she’d left.

“Thank you for last night. Thank you for... everything.” She called softly, the only response a flexing of his hands at his sides.

“Take care of yourself, Solo. Please. For me.” She muttered at last, and stepped out into the quiet hall. She took a step toward the lifts, and then another one, each one hurting more than the last. She had been true to herself, she reminded herself as she descended, her heart still locked in the quiet, bare space floors above her, with the man who still felt too much, and nothing at all. She wondered why it felt like she was making a mistake.
You guys! Thanks to all my regular commenters and all my new ones too. I'm going to get around to responding, hopefully later today.

This chapter took an age to finish, it was kind of exhausting, I don't know why, maybe I'm too invested and feeling everything these two feel is knackering.

I estimate 1 or 2 chapters left of Act II. It all seems very dramatic lately, but this is the build up to some revelations and break throughs, and I don't feel like they could get there without some serious emotional pain. For those of you expecting smut here - I'm not going to lie, I thought about it (prob too much) but it didn't feel like the right time for Rey.

Please let me know what you think! I love hearing your thoughts, and they really do help me refine my take on what's going to happen... for example, the Kylo Ren POV here is tribute to one of my most fervent commenters - Jess444! Hope you enjoy x
Tonight I'm going to bury that horse in the ground

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Your comments are making me live!!

Thank you so much))

This chapter is heavy guys - really really heavy. This is the darkest chapter of the story.

Again, this is a true reflection of what I feel the movie characters have experienced/gone through. To me it is a very disturbing part of canon character identity.

See you on the other side.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next afternoon, she got off the train and Jack was waiting. The journey upstate had been filled with gorgeous scenery and Rey had let her mind meander. She needed to be with Jack, and his warm, relieved embrace when he saw her, helped heal her tattered heart.

Her old bedroom was poignantly familiar, and she quickly immersed herself in all the things of home. They watched old movies together over burnt popcorn, and went to their favourite diner for dinner. They tinkered with radio parts, which Jack always had lying around and they talked while they were working. They talked about the hospital visits, and his diagnosis and at first, she could hardly hear it, could hardly stand it, and bit by bit, she saw how Jack seemed to stand taller, with every word spoken. And so, she listened, so that he could share his experience with someone, so that he didn’t feel alone. She told him that she wished he had shared the burden with her soon, and he told her he regretted having to tell her now. Such is the way we try to protect the ones we love.

“Why did you decide to tell me now?” she asked and he’d looked at her a long moment.

“Can I wait till the end of the week to tell you?” he’d said, somewhat cryptically. Rey had frowned, warning bells instantly ringing, but he had assured her there was not change in his health or prognosis.

She walked in the woods, past the tree where she’d first seen Ben, 6 years and a lifetime ago. She thought about him often, walking the needle strewn paths of their past. When they had been children, on the cusp of adulthood. She hoped he was alright, locked in his glass monolith, with Snoke watching his every move, stuck inside a prison of his own making, forgetting how to use a key, only he held.

She thought about his proposal. It didn’t anger her, she understood better now, what he felt like he was offering. The very most he could give, as he was now. She understood it. If she had been a little braver, and maybe a little more reckless, she might have been able to give it a chance. Putting her heart on the line had never come easy for her, someone used to disappointment. And now, that fear had lost her Ben from her life, something that felt like a punishment.
She felt close to him here, surrounded by the relics of times long gone and it comforted her in a way. Jack had prodded her about it Ben in his own way, as they played scramble by the fire one night, not really cold enough for one, but both wanting the comfort of the roaring flames.

“Are you still in touch?” Jack asked lightly, concentrating on his tiles.

“Not really, not just now.” Rey demurred.

“Pity, it seems like that boy could use a friend.” Jack said.

“Why would you say that?” Rey asked, watching as he carefully picked his word and made his move, she counted up his score.

“He doesn’t speak to his mother, you know”

“I know. That doesn’t answer why he needs a friend” Rey said, concentrating on her own tiles, horribly distracted by Jacks line of questioning.

“Leia, she’s a good woman” Jack said, and Rey bit back a retort that she wasn’t a great mother, given Ben’s myriad of issues.

“In fact, I’ve gotten to know her a little better, these past weeks, Chemo, you know, if you’re alone, you can chat”

“Wait, what? Leia Organa has cancer?” Rey said slowly. Jack blinked at her, and nodded slowly, realising this was something Rey hadn’t known.

“Yeah, I mean, sorry, I don’t know why I thought you’d know. She and Ben are estranged, so it’s not really surprising that he doesn’t know.”

“How are you sure he doesn’t know?” Jack shrugged at her.

“Because, if he knew, so would you” he said.

“That’s a leap”

“Honey, I’ve known that boy loved you since practically the first time I met him. If he was going to tell anybody, it’d be you” Rey stared at Jack in silence, her mind turning over the words.

Ben’s mother had met Jack through the treatment he was getting. Ben’s mother was ill, and he probably had no idea. It made her feel sick and anxious. She let out a deep breath.

“That’s not a word” Jack said, looking down at the random collection of tiles that she had assembled. She tried to force her mind back to the game, but couldn’t stop seeing Ben’s face, if he lost the chance to re-establish contact with his mother, at him losing another connection to the world and a person who must still care about him.

She read and she painted and the week passed slowly. She worried about Leia Organa and Ben. She called in sick to Resistance, and realised on the phone that she had very little desire to go back
there. Jessika was working on new bids, now that they had quit the First Order one. Until then, she had little to do, and even less money, so she knew she better think of something next. On Tuesday night, she’d texted the girls about class being cancelled and was surprised to find that they had decided to meet in the hall anyway. They were building their own community and Rey had never been prouder.

It made her think about Ben and his sparring session, how it had invigorated the class, made them see self-defence as something they could access. She wondered if maybe she could get Finn to come along sometimes in the future, if it would have a similar effect.

One evening, she had convinced Jack to take her to the cinema, something he normally avoided. It was raining outside and she could tell he was already changing his mind.

“Don’t look out the window, don’t even think about it! I’ll be right down” Rey called from the top of the stairs, before bolting into her room to get a jacket. She grabbed her leather one, the only one she’d brought with her, before deciding something old from her wardrobe might be better, if it still fit. She was dropping the jacket, when a sharp rustling noise drew her attention. She picked the jacket up, feeling an angular, plastic shape in the inner pocket. She suddenly remembered the box in Ben’s wardrobe, and the worn leather gloves, forgotten in a haze of tears and alcohol.

She pulled open the zip, slowly and pulled out the envelop.

*Personal effects Mr Solo, Han - Deceased*

She stared at it a long moment. Often you don’t know those pivotal moment are coming, and they blind side you. Now though, Rey could almost feel the weight of destiny, pressing in on her. That red string that had tied her to Ben and never quite broken.

She opened the slip of plastic and pulled out the contents.

There are two pictures, and nothing else. She looked at the first, seeing a very young Ben, little more than a toddler, on the shoulders of a young Han Solo. They seemed to be on a private airstrip, and were both wearing matching aviators, and flight jackets, even little Ben. He was smiling up at the sky, and Han was smiling up at him. Rey felt a tug in her heart for that relationship, now in ruins, with no way to repair it. She was thinking how odd it was that this was all Han Solo had had in his possession when he’d died, as she flipped to the next picture.

Her blood froze and that roaring that she had heard inside her head in Plutt’s apartment started up slowly, her skin prickling with goose bumps. She dropped the picture, as if burned and stared at the edge of it, peeking out from under the bed.

Gradually she reached out and picked it up, holding it gingerly by the edges.

In the photo, Ben is older, a solemn looking 8-year-old, perhaps. He isn’t alone in the picture. Snoke is there, and Ben is sitting on his knee. In the background, there is a woman, not Leia, holding nursery toys, and sending a disapproving look at the other man in the shot.

Rey couldn’t drag her eyes away from Snoke’s hand, wrapped around Ben’s knee, the other hand on his neck. It could have been completely innocent, if not for the look on Snoke’s face, as he regarded the little boy, and Ben’s eyes, on the camera, but already so far away. Snoke expression was rapt with love, his touch screamed possession to Rey, no stranger to the lustful looks of evil men. And Ben, already lost, already alone, with a monster for company.

And suddenly, it fell into place with a click that resounded down through the years. Did he know?
Did he remember? When had it started? When had it stopped? She knew then that there was so much more to Ben Solo’s issues, and in the same moment, that to bring it up would shatter him. She stood up, rushing for the bathroom, her dinner making a prompt reappearance. She vomited again, and again, her stomach literally rebelling against the food inside, turned upside down. Jack found her there, crouched beside the toilet, tears running down her face.

“What’s happened? Dinner can’t have been that bad, surely?” Jack said, hovering by her as she gripped the toilet with trembling fingers. At length, she pushed herself up off the floor, and rinsed her mouth out with water, splashing some on her face.

“What happened, the night Han Solo died?” she croaked to Jack, how leaned back against the sink and thought about it.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if anyone does, save Ben” he said, and Rey stilled.

“Ben was there?”

“He was found on the road, a little way from the accident, seemed like he was going in that direction when… it happened” Jack said.

“Someone at the school said they were going to sell that big old house up there, and that the family had gone back to clear out the personals, you know, the things staff can’t do.”

Rey listened numbly, already seeing in her mind’s eye, Han Solo finding a picture that suddenly made the distancing of his son over the years, make sense. Changing the sweet boy who’d laughed and flown with him, into the angry teen who isolated himself more and more everyday. She imagined him confronting Ben, and then tearing out the house, perhaps to confront the predator that had snuck into their lives and stolen their son’s innocence, angry at himself at the same time, for looking away, for not seeing. She imagined Ben, and didn’t know how he would react to his father confronting him with those ugly and heart-breaking things. She wondered if Ben blamed himself for his death, and even as the question formed, she knew the answer. Of course he did, because Ben Solo had been targeted by a predator from a young age and like so many abused children, blamed himself for everything that happened.

And now, she felt sick again, as she thought of an emotionally distant man, who had been groomed by a respected family friend from a shockingly young age, who had been influenced into isolating himself from everyone in his life, taken on a new persona to deal with the psychological trauma of the experience, and to this day, protected and interacted with his abuser. She remembered his words in the community hall.

“It’s too late for me, Rey. I’m damned. Don’t make it harder. You weren’t wrong before, to call me a monster. In real life, the monster doesn’t get to be saved. In real life, everyone celebrates the monsters defeat, and no one mourns him. No one deludes themselves into thinking that he could make amends, that he could be forgiven. That’s reality.”

And she had responded by calling him a coward, she swallowed hard.

Snoke had groomed Ben perfectly, shaping him into Kylo Ren. He had succeeded in getting Ben to push everyone out his life, even her, when they were teenagers in love.

But not anymore, Rey realised with a start.

He was seeking a relationship with her, a twisted and strange one, to be sure, but a connection after all. The part of Ben that longed to be saved couldn’t seem to let go of Rey, and she thought of his
face, defeated and empty as she rejected his advances a final time.

“*I can’t, I just can’t, not yet, this, this is all I’m allowed*” he said quietly, like a whispered prayer.

And she had asked him who gave him permission to start the toxic relationship he’d tried to convince her to embark on. Now, she knew. She felt sick again, her throat still raw with her reaction to the picture.

“Rey?” Jack asked, and she curled the picture into the palm of her hand, not wanting to betray Ben’s most private secrets.

“I’m ok. Just – sad” she said, looking up at her beloved uncle, the one who had saved her from a life of poverty and fear. The one who had borne his sisters loss and did what she couldn’t, looked after her daughter.

She pressed herself into Jack’s arms, and let the tears she was trying so hard to hold back come.

‘Sweetheart, what’s wrong?’ he asked. Rey sniffed the comforting smell of Jack and home. She remembered sitting with Ben in his room. Talking about what they wanted to be when they were older.

Ben answering that he wanted to feel in control, to feel safe and Rey had teased him that she didn’t think he was about to get kicked out his palatial home.

*There are other ways to feel unsafe* Ben had said.

She wondered when he had last felt safe.

“I’ve made so many mistakes” Rey finally said, as her tears slowly stopped. Jack rubbed warm circles on her back, and let out a long sigh.

“Is this about Solo?” he asked gruffly.

She nodded, sniffing loudly, and leaning away as Jack patted her arm.

“I guess I might as well tell you now, no point in waiting” he said.

“What is it?”

“I have to tell you why I’m coming clean about the cancer, despite no change in prognosis.”

“Ok” Rey said carefully, not sure her heart could take another blow right now.

“Let’s sit” Jack instructed, and she let herself be led to the edge of her bed, as Jack settled onto her dressing table chair.

“I have to tell you something, and he’s not going to like it” he said, and Rey stopped, the fall rain coming down heavier now, outside, hammering the windows as the dark evening shifted into a stormy night.

“What?”

“It doesn’t make me feel good, god knows, I tried to refuse, but – have you ever tried to refuse that man anything? It’s near impossible” Jack was saying and Rey wanted to scream in frustration at the delay.
“Tell me, what is it”

“Since the diagnosis… I’ve had specialists and whatnot, coming out here, to see me. My test results are always through right away, and my insurance says it’s all covered, and I know it’s not. None of its covered Rey. The hospital referrals, they aren’t the local one, they are in New York, and they’re not cheap. How do you think I was in the same ward as Leia Organa, for goodness sake. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t have our crappy insurance.” Jack said, cracking his knuckles nervously.

“It’s Ben” she said slowly, calculating how long he had already been caring for her uncle, her surrogate father, when she hadn’t even known he was sick.

He had already known about Jack when she’d shown up at his apartment. Even as he had just hoped to use it to his advantage, to sway her into agreeing to his idea of a relationship, he already been paying for Jack’s medical care.

He had done it to stop one more person she loved from leaving her, she knew it completely in her heart at that moment. The man who would hold her safe from abandonment with every fibre of his being, even when they were still strangers.

“I’m not too proud to say – I’ve been taking it, all the help I can get… and I know it’s wrong, I know it’s shameful” Jack said, and Rey gripped his shoulders hard and hugged him to her.

“Surviving isn’t shameful. Taking help isn’t shameful. Not leaving me willingly… isn’t shameful” she said the last with a smile, her tears once again falling.

“How did he find out?” Rey asked, and Jack settled back.

“He’s on the board at St Augustine’s, his father’s old position. He doesn’t come to meetings I don’t think, but he oversees the scholarship.” Jack explained.

“The Rey of Hope Initiative?” she asked, thinking of the programme that had been set up after she’d graduated, to take in a disadvantaged student every year, and give them the same opportunity as she’d had. She remembered teasing Jack about the name, even while being happy that more kids like her would benefit. Jack nodded.

“The board had to approve more custodial staff, as the treatments and everything take up so much time. Add in the travel to the city… and the whole day’s gone.”

“We will move Jack into your place in Brooklyn, or a new place in the city, if you wish, so he isn’t travelling for medical care and you will move in here, with me”

Ben’s voice spoke in her ear from the week before.

“So he found out-“

“Last year, little more than that ago” Rey sat back digesting that.

“I went to see him, you know. At that fancy office he has uptown.” Jack said.

“What happened?”

“Well, I didn’t think they were going to let me, to begin with, but they called him, and gave him my name, and I was sent right up”
Rey thought of that sterile office she’d been in, and marvelled that Jack had been there before her. “I flat out asked him, about the insurance and money. He didn’t deny it, in so many words, just alluded to St. Augustine’s being involved, but I knew, I knew it was him” Jack said.

“He wouldn’t admit it, wouldn’t let me thank him. He asked me about you. I told him I didn’t feel comfortable telling him anything, since you weren’t in touch anymore.” Rey nodded, she could imagine Jack saying that.

“He didn’t argue. He asked if you were happy… I didn’t see anything wrong with answering that. I told him you were. It seemed to satisfy him” Jack said, giving a heavy sigh of relief, the burden lifting off him of keeping secrets.

“I should be angry at you, for keeping all this secret” Rey sniffed, her nose stuffy and sore from crying again. She couldn’t seem to stop these days.

“I know, believe me. I just knew what you’d go through, when you knew. I love you, Rey, I don’t want to see you hurt. I told you now, because I know Ben is back in your life, and I didn’t want to pull him into the lie too. You see, I told him you didn’t know, and I didn’t plan on telling, until I had good news. He was happy with that, he just asked that if I did tell you, that I would keep my theories about the insurance to myself” Jack rolled his eyes, on the word theories, making it clear he had never believed Ben’s denial.

“What a mess” Rey muttered, rubbing the dried tears from her sticky eyelashes. Jack nodded in agreement. They sat a while in silence, the revelations filling the air between them.

“You still want to go to the movies?” Rey shook her head immediately, her head swimming with her new knowledge.

“Let’s do a movie at home, and ice-cream. Ice-cream makes everything better” Jack pronounced, standing up and slapping his knees.

“Let’s see what we’ve got” he said, heading to the kitchen. Rey watched him go.

“Looks like we’ll need to go out and get some, unless you want to make do with pop tarts, damn” Jack called, and his tired voice sent Rey to her feet.

“I’ll go, you choose the movie” she said, shoving her feet into her converse, a ratty high school pair, and shrugging her leather jacket on, mindless of the rain outside.

She ran to the car in the deluge, thinking maybe pop tarts weren’t too bad an idea, and started the engine. She drove in a dream into town. The familiar and shops did little to lift her mood as she pulled into the grocery store and ran again from the car into the shop, her feet sliding wetly on the tile. She headed up the aisle, and looked for the freezer section, quickly finding the ice-cream and staring at the myriad choices.

“Rey? Are you Rey Nessuno?” a voice asked behind her, and she looked over her shoulder, pulled the freezer door shut after her.

The woman was beautiful, blonde and statuesque, and sporting a rather large, pregnant belly, she hovered behind her with a hesitant smile.

“Yes… sorry, do I know you?” Rey asked, and the woman’s face suddenly transformed into a teenager’s.
“Eliza, Eliza Montgomery”

“Eliza?” she said, in surprise. The woman smiled a little and nodded confirmation. Rey stared at her speechless for a long moment.

“Are you here visiting Ben?” Rey felt like she had slipped into the twilight zone for a moment.

“No, my uncle…”

“Jack! Of course. How is he?”

“Good, thanks. We are both good. Congratulations” she said, belatedly, eyes drifting to Eliza’s swollen belly.

“Thanks, it’s number two, and we are going on 8 months now, so commiserations are probably more appropriate” she laughed, and Rey was struck by how different this woman was to the stuck up, insecure girl she’d known in high school.

“My husband Sam, he’s taking John, my son, to the movies, I have to go and meet them” Eliza said, and Rey couldn’t help but glance at her hand, where she saw a modest wedding band.

“You’re married?”

“Going on three years now.”

“Wow. I don’t feel like I’ve accomplished basically anything since high school, well done” Rey offered with a tentative smile.

“Thanks.” Eliza said warmly and they stared at each other a long moment, until Rey lifted her ice-cream.

“I better get on. Nice to see you, Eliza” she said, starting down the aisle.

“Rey! I – Can I ask you if you’ve spoken to Ben recently?” Eliza asked, and Rey stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“Last week, why?”

“I was just wondering, I know it’s not my place… I just worry about him” Everyone needed to have someone worry about them, she thought, with a sincere feeling of gratitude.

“Are you close?”

“Not really, well, as close as anyone is to Ben. Close for Ben, I suppose, though, it’s been harder, these last few years, to get him to stay in touch” Eliza said. Rey’s surprise that Ben had a friend must have shown on her face.

“Ben was there for me, when no one else understood me, when no one else could. Did he ever tell you about my father?” Eliza said suddenly. Rey shook her head.

“He was arrested for insider trading, no big deal, right? Well, he hung himself in prison, after about a year” Eliza said and Rey made a sympathetic noise, seeing a bright veneer or tears glaze Eliza’s blue eyes, until she shook her head sternly.

“No, you don’t understand… I was relieved. I was so happy, because it meant he’d never get out, and come home” Eliza revealed softly, her eyes challenging Rey to understand her meaning.
“But Ben understood” Rey said slowly, and Eliza nodded.

“Ben understood” and they both thought of him, the boy who had gotten lost along the way, that no one had seen suffering.

“He’s here, you know. Up at his house. It’s finally being sold, and he had to clear out his room. He always put it off, after Han’s death. Couldn’t face it I guess, but being Ben, just couldn’t find time in his schedule. It’s the last room needing done. He could have let someone else do it, just toss everything from that place where… so many memories lie.” Eliza’s voice said that she wasn’t finished.

“Why hasn’t he?”

“I think there’s not just bad memories there… there’s the worst but there’s also the best. The memories of you that live in that house” she said, turning Rey’s pulse to thunder in her veins.

“I have to go” she said in a rush, shoving the ice-cream back into a freezer. She stopped as Eliza grabbed her arm.

“I know it’s not my place, I know… but.. please… don’t give him hope if you’re not sure. It would be worse than not trying. Be sure you can do what he needs you to, before you go. I’m not sure he could take… hurting you more than he already has. Breaking you -”

“I don’t break easily” Rey said, realising it was true.

“He won’t want your pity, believe me, I know” Eliza advised her eyes wide as she watched the determined look creep across Rey’s face.

“I’m not going to give him my pity. I’m going to give him my surrender.”

Chapter End Notes

Argh... *hides in fear* we just veered into real, non sexy angst times.

This development has been foreshadowed from the start, and especially once we start to see the emotional connection from Snoke to Ben. A grooming relationship doesn't have to be involving actual sexual activity, it can be any behaviour that creates an intimate relationship and makes the child feel shame, and feel the need to hide the relationship, it can also create an emotional dependency that can last years.

I will not be further exploring Ben's childhood years, I think it is best to let the reader chose what to do with that. We have Rey's assumptions here in this chapter, based on how well she knows Ben. That is the extent of detail that will be written on Ben and Snoke's childhood relationship.

There is a lot going on in this chapter - and it's the second to last chapter before the end of this Act II. Looks like we will be delivering on those tags soonish... but worry not... don't forget... Rey's no push over))

As for feeling like Rey is just excusing Ben because of his past, the previous few chapters tried to show that Ben has already come some way toward her, that he is trying his best, and she is drawn to him... it was really hard for her to walk away from
him last time... and now, she doesn't want to anymore... her feelings finally outweigh her misgivings...

I hope you've enjoyed this, even thought its super heavy... let me know what you think!
There's no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin

Chapter Notes

Take me to church - Hozier

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain was showing no sign of abating, as she drove toward the Solo house. She went carefully
on the roads, wondering where exactly Han Solo had met his end. Despite the years that had
passed, she found that she knew the road like she had when she was 16.

She pulled up at the security gate, and saw the light was off. Getting out the car, she ran to the hut,
and banged on the door. She waited a long moment in the soaking rain, and then ran back to the
car. It seemed locked up tight, and there was no one inside. Maybe since they were selling and no
one lived here anymore, the days of security were over. There was still the high fence to contend
with, Rey realised, chewing her lip as she looked at the gate, closed up tightly, before her
headlights.

She pulled out her phone, her wet fingers sliding on the touch screen, and had to wipe them twice
on the seats before she could get Jack’s number up.

“Rey? You got lost?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting… Something’s come up”

“Oh really, now” Jack voice sounded suspiciously knowing.

“It wouldn’t have anything to do with Ben would it?”

“How’d you know?”

“Well, I happen to know that Eliza Montgomery lives in town and her husband owns the grocery
store”

“Are you serious? Did you send me out on purpose?”

“Of course not, how would I know she’d be there?” Jack huffed.

“Well, there was a chance of it…”

“Yeah, I guess there was a chance” Jack had a smile in his voice.

“How did you know, about Ben and Eliza?”

“Oh, I guess I know far more about all those kids than they thought. No one notices the janitor”
Jack said simply and Rey laughed.

“More fool them” she said.

“Let me guess, you’ll be late, if you end up making it home at all?” he asked, and she was
overwhelmed by love for her uncle.
The man who had sheltered her, and taken care of her, the one who now was trying to help her follow her heart, seeing the whole picture more clearly than she could. He never asked anything of her, had even accepted her lame excuse of a class accident with a staff for why her lip was split when she’d got off the bus. He trusted her, wholly and completely, and it was everything. He had told her about Ben, because he trusted her to make the right choices and follow her heart.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Ok?”

“Ok, sweetheart.”

“Jack! Why didn’t you want to tell me about Ben sooner this week… you made me wait” she said suddenly, remembering.

“Why do you think? I haven’t told you half an hour, and I’m sitting here alone with a crumby Western and a pop tart for company. I just wanted you to myself for a bit” he sighed but it wasn’t a sad one.

“I love you”

“Right back at you”

She hung up and started the car again. She drove around the outside of the property, searching for the place Ben had once showed her, wondering if she’d be able to find it.

She could hardly make anything out in the light from the streetlights, and the relentless rain. She pulled the car over, as close as she could to the wall and got out. She stared up at the looming wall, and thought through her options. She could just home to Jacks, and finish her time there. Go back to the city as scheduled and call Ben at First Order, and ask him to meet her for lunch. She could show up at his apartment again. Or she could see him, right here, tonight.

Before she could lose her nerve, she pulled herself up on the bonnet the car, and then, holding onto the wall, climbed up on the roof of the car. The paint was slick under her feet and she hung on desperately, as she shifted her weight carefully toward the wall. The very top was about chest level on her, and with a deep breath, she shifted her weight onto her arms, slung over the rough stone, and pulled up with all the strength. Her stomach muscles rebelled, but she ground her teeth and continued, getting a toe hold in the stone with her trainer, and then, slowly pulling herself up until she was flat along the top of the wall.

Her feeling of triumph soon faded as she looked along the wall, on the property side, and didn’t see the tree she was counting on being there. She strained her neck to see it, through the rain, which had definitely soaked right through her clothes by this point. She could just make out the irregular shape of foliage about 10 meters down. She pushed herself carefully into a straddling position, and then, into a seated one, swinging her legs around in front of her. She considered just launching off, onto what was probably grass, but then dismissed it. She couldn’t be sure how she’d fall, and the last thing she wanted was to show up at his door with a broken leg.

She finally felt the brush of leaves against her shins, and reached out, looking for good branches to
climb down. Gradually, she got into the tree, and felt her way down.

Once her feet hit the ground, she was running over the grass, in the direction of the drive, planning to follow it up to the house. The estate was huge and she didn’t want to risk running right into the swimming pool.

Her feet once more on concrete, she approached the house, barely making out the hulking shape in the darkness. There was the barest illumination in one of the upper windows, and she decided to start there. She approached the door, already worrying how to get in, if Ben didn’t answer. She supposed she could throw a rock through the glass, in for a penny, in for a pound, she thought, as she tried the door first just to check.

It swung open under her hand. She stared at the long hallway, with stairs branching off, before her, and then shook off her surprise and stepped inside. It was cold, she thought with a shiver, probably they didn’t keep much heating going now it was empty. She pulled the door shut behind her, the sudden absence of the rain in her ears was almost deafening.

She started up the stairs, aiming for the room she had seen the light in. She moved soundlessly down the hall, seeing furniture draped in white sheets, empty walls where art used to hang. It was a ghost house, and, as she ventured further in, she looked for the one man left awake. She found a familiar corridor, the one holding Ben’s room.

She advanced down it, feeling the past shadowing her every step and all the choices and twists of fate that had brought her back here. The door was ajar, and she gently pushed it open, and stepped in.

It was bare, gone were the traces of the boy who had lived inside. The walls were pale in the darkness, and she saw a small night light plugged in beside the bed. She wondered where he had dug it up from, and how long it had given him comfort.

There was a box on the bed, and she went to it, far beyond worrying about invading Ben’s privacy. She reached inside, and pulled out the objects inside. A set of racing cars. A trophy from a science fair. A black and white picture of Leia Organa, impossible young, and pregnant, her radiant face so full of hope. A matching pair of aviators, the ones from the photos, a man’s pair and a child’s. A picture of Ben at his graduation, standing in his robes, with Rey beside him. Rey is smiling at the camera, and she is holding his arm, her cheap floral dress floating in the wind and Ben is looking down at her with such fondness on his face, such love. She didn’t know now, how she could have missed it.

A sudden crash jolted Rey from her thoughts, and she dropped the picture on the bed. Swallowed a sudden wave of nerves, she made her way to the door, and looked down the hallway toward the staircase leading to the family living area of the house.

She moved in that direction, her heart starting to pound. She went quietly down the stairs, following the warm, golden light emanating from the family lounge. She heard a soft cracking, a fire, she guessed, matching up the soft light that was dancing around the doorway, as she reached the threshold, and looked inside.

The room was almost completely bare, the only remaining furniture, shrouded in those same white covers as the rest of the house. It was almost ethereal, the high ceilings and huge windows, in the empty white space, like a blank canvas, awaiting the first stroke of paint.

There were no lights on, just the roaring fire, and the muted moon, struggling to fight through the rain. It painted dancing shadows of flame and silver against the walls, and over the man standing
before the hearth, his arm braced on the ornate mantel, his forehead against his forearm, looking down into the flames. There was a box beside him, and she saw him pick something up from inside, and add it to the flames. He pulled a bottle off the ledge above his head and took a pull of the contents, the amber liquid glowing in the firelight.

“Come in Rey, you’ve never needed an invitation before” he said, causing her to jump at the sudden noise in the stillness, despite the alcohol, his voice is clear. She came further into the room, shivering a little at the cold of the empty house on her wet skin. He seemed so remote, she didn’t even know how to approach him. He hadn’t moved, his eyes glued to the burning pictures he was dropping there.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked, drawing level with him, and looking into the fire, where a picture of Ben receiving an award in martial arts burning, curling around the edges.

“It’s always you. The only one who chose me, the only one who never left… well… until now.” he muttered, reaching into the box for a model spaceship, painstakingly constructed and painted. She wondered if he had done it with his father. She reached out and grabbed it, stilling his hand, and he looked at her with surprise.

“Don’t. Don’t destroy the past. You might miss these things one day”

“If we don’t burn the past, how can we be free?” he asked, his voice raw. She tugged the plane from his fingers and looked at it, delicate in her cold fingertips.

“We let it go. We just chose to let it go” she whispered softly, and looked up to find his dark eyes trained on her with a look of such longing.

Caught in his gaze, she didn’t even realise she was shivering, the warm of the fire on her legs making her cold back and shoulders even more pronounced, as a drop of freezing water dripped from the end of her nose. She sneezed.

Ben had frozen at the small sound, his mouth open in shock, as he looked at her differently now.

“Are you – You’re really here” he said, looking at her in such bewilderment, that she couldn’t help the swelling of her heart. She carefully put the plane down in the box and stood back up, reaching toward him before he could shy away. She grabbed his hands from his sides and laced her fingers through his while he looked at her with wonder and then stepped into the circle of his arms, resting her head against his breastbone. He was slow to respond, slow to realise she really was there, and she was embracing him. His arms came up around her.

She leaned away and raised her fingertips to his full lips and brushed them closed, bidding him to be silent. She then raised herself into her tiptoes, though she still had to tug his head down to her to reach him, and pulled his lips to hers. He was still, almost as if afraid to wake from a dream. She moved her softened mouth against his, let her tongue press on the seam of his closed lips. He gasped at the hot, wet intrusion, it’s intimacy and then she felt him hesitantly kiss her back, his tongue sliding against hers in an erotic promise that made her forget her previous chill. She pressed her body against his, feeling his hollows fit to her curves, and his hardness meld perfectly into her softness.

Two halves of one whole.

She pulled back a lifetime later, when his kiss had made her dizzy, her body swollen with want. He
drew a ragged breath as she looked up into his face, lit with firelight. She brought her hands up to cup his face, as he mirrored her movements. He ran his thumbs over her cheekbones, again and again, as if to prove to himself that she was real.

And then, quite suddenly, she sneezed.

She laughed at the intrusion, and he seemed to realise how wet she was. He stepped reluctantly back.

“I’ve got a towel” he said, turning toward the door, and looking back hesitantly on the threshold.

“You’ll still be here, when I get back?” he asked.

“I’m not going anywhere” Rey said, and was rewarded with a profound look of relief before he disappeared into the darkness of the hall.

In his absence, she unlaced her wet shoes and peeled off wet socks, kicking them away. She also stripped off her wet jacket.

Ben came back quickly, a hand towel in hand.

“It was all I could find” he said apologetically, as she smiled at the meagre offering in his hand.

“It’s fine.” She assured him. They stared at each other, and she could feel that he had questions, so many questions, but was scared to break the spell that seemed to have fallen. Her wet hair was dripping onto her shoulder, and Ben frowned at it.

“May I?” he asked suddenly, lifting the towel. She nodded and he stepped toward her. He raised the towel and ran it over her hair, blotting the rain from it. It had brought him close to her, and now she raised a hand to catch him, her hand bunching his t-shirt, preventing him from stepping away. She looked up at him, every feeling she’d ever had for him, plain in her eyes.

Gathering her courage, she dropped her hand to her soaked t-shirt and pulled it up and over her head. Discarding it in a sodden heap beside them. The warmth of the fire licked over her bare skin, as she stood in front of him, in only a wet, translucent bra. The look of reverence that crossed Ben’s face was almost painful to see.

Slowly, he brought the towel back up between them, gently rubbing up each arm, drying the cold skin there. He swept it across her bare stomach and around her back, and she watched his expressions shift as he discovered each new part of her body. Finally there was only the bra left, cold and clinging against the rest of her newly invigorated skin.

She could feel her nipples pulling into sharp points as she reached behind her and slid the clasp open. He watched her steadily, as she pulled the sodden straps down her arms, and then, pulled the sucking fabric from her breasts, dropping it onto the t-shirt on the floor. Ben closed the gap between them with the towel quickly, covering her cold skin, gently rubbing away the chill, hiding her from his eyes, the rough fabric of the towel gently scraping against her nipples, and her breath suddenly caught in her chest, the pure and urgent need in her so alien and welcome. At length, while he stood, still pressing the towel against her chest, giving her modesty she no longer wanted, she lowered her hands to her jeans. She undid the top button and then the zip. She wiggled the stiff fabric off her hips, and gave the ghost of a laugh as she found how difficult it was.

And then, Ben was kneeling before her. He raised his hands to her hips, his strong fingers digging into the unyielding fabric, and then he was dragging them down. She leant on him as he extracted one foot and then the next, pushing the jeans to the side, and looking up at her with such hunger in
his eyes. He reached for the towel as she sank her fingers into his hair, and then he was sliding the
towel up and down her legs, chasing the last of the cold from her body, and setting her skin on fire
with desire. His eyes begged her to explain why she had come, even while they pleaded with her
not to leave. He slowly traced the back of her legs with his hands, bringing his scorching hands to
rest on the back of her thighs, still looking up at her, waiting for her, hers to command.

She didn’t know where to start, how to tell him her heart, and settled for the simplest way she
could.

“I lied. I do feel it too. I’ve never stopped.”

She felt her breath whoosh out as he brought his strong arms around her middle and pressed his
head into her stomach.

She ran her fingers in long waves through his hair, against his scalp, and felt his massive shoulders
rise and fall in deep, peaceful breaths.

“Rey” he whispered her name life a prayer, and his ragged tone spilt the swollen heart open inside
her, and she felt it then, the past was all around them. She could see their first meeting in the
reflection of flames on the wall, their first kiss in the branches swaying outside. 16 things with
chocolate and the glow of candles in the fire. She saw him desperately pushing her away, his awful
look, you’re nothing, no-one, in the shadows gathering in the corners.

And, she let them go. She let them all go.

“There’s two of us now, You’re not alone, not anymore” she murmured, and he clutched even
harder for a moment, before leaning away, and looking up at her, his expressive eyes more open
and familiar than she’d seen.

She lowered herself to her knees in front of him, bringing them level. Taking a deep breath, his
intense longing burning into her skin, she reached for his shirt, and drew it up his body. This time,
he lifted his heavily muscled arms and let her draw it over his head. He lowered his arms slowly,
and was bared under her gaze, and a shadow of something in his eyes, told her that it was difficult
for him, to expose himself so fully to her scrutiny, even more so than her. He let out a long breath,
as she raised her palm to his chest, placing it directly over his heart, where he had pressed it before,
a silent plea for absolution.

She leaned forward, and replaced her hand with her lips, pressing soft kisses onto his chest. She
had no idea what to do next, and looked up to see Ben looked down at her raptly. She leaned away,
exposing her naked chest to him once more, and his eyes flickered down to her breasts, rosy in the
firelight.

“Your turn, I think” she murmured, a touch of a smile on her lips. He didn’t need to be told twice.
He lowered his head to her chest, his lips and fingers moving over her skin. He kissed down to her
breasts, while his fingers skimmed over her hard nipples, already crying out for his touch. Then his
warm mouth was closing over one, this other hand cupping the other breast, gently kneading it
between his strong fingers. Rey doubled forward, the sensation making her squirm. She held his
head to her as he teased and pulled, swirled the hard pebble between his hard lips and gentle
tongue, before kissing across to the next one, and lavishing it with the same attention. She moaned
his name in his hair, and his hands flexed on her ribs, holding her gently in place.

The feelings were so much, too much, a fever building in her, stoked and banked for years now,
and demanding release. She scratched her nails down his long back, over the faint ridges of scars
and he hissed in pleasure and pain, as he looked up to see her, his eyes as black with desire at hers.
She impatiently tucked her fingers into the waist bank of his jeans and pulled, demonstrating her desire. He looked at her a long moment, a question in his eyes, even as she tugged again. He stood quickly, and stripped off his jeans. She watched him without shame, her eyes exploring the long, muscled legs with their dusting of hair, right up to his underwear. He looked down at her, his chest moving unnaturally fast.

“Everything” she said quietly, and then, they were also sliding down and he was kneeling back before her. She couldn’t stop looking at him, aware that slight tremor of insecurity was back in his gaze. She ran her hands tentatively up his thighs, bunched in his kneeling position. He clenched his fists at his sides.

“You have to… show me what to do” she whispered, her eyes lingering on the most masculine part of him, suddenly very aware of her inexperience. She reached out one finger, and touched the very tip, her eyes flying to his in surprise as it jerked under her gentle exploration. He groaned at her ministrations, before leaning over her, and carefully pushing her back onto the rug before the fire. It was soft and padded beneath her and she relaxed into a puddle of warmth, watching him settle himself between her legs, his mouth level with her breasts again.

In mere moments, he had rekindled the fire he had started before with his mouth and hands, making her pant below him, writhing to press him against her legs, something, anything to provide the friction she was so desperately reaching for. As she shifted her hips, grinding them against his chest, he looked up at her, catching her gaze down her body, and growled into her stomach.

“Quit that. Let me take me time” he said, nipping at her skin, and she jumped at the edge of pleasure and pain. He continued down, kissing, nipping, and all she could so was hold onto his hair, and experience the overwhelming rush of sensation and emotion flooding through her.

She was aware of everything. The feel of the fire on left side of her body, the whisper of the rain still falling outside, a band of moonlight moving over Ben’s shoulders. When she felt like there wasn’t an inch of her skin he hadn’t marked as his, she felt his breath through her underwear, the only remain piece of fabric between them.

She felt his nose gently press against her through the thin material, moving in lazy circles. She could feel his chest expand against her legs as he inhaled deeply, and then, he pressed a hot, open mothed kiss on her. The teasing warmth and friction, the promise of what was to come was too much for Rey and she raised her hips, bringing his head up with them and pulled her knickers down, pulling her feet out and tossing them aside, lowering her legs back down each side of Ben as he smiled, his expression a little wondrous, down at her. He lowered himself back down, pressing a hot trail of kisses along the inside of her thigh, as she squirmed under him, again, her instinct driving her to get things focused on the part of her that felt like it was on fire.

And then, his mouth was there, his lips gently brushing against her, and then, a long slow swipe of his tongue. She bent double, almost squeezing his head between her thighs. She panted, looking down at him again, even just the sight of him there making her feel warmer and warmer. He caressed her with his tongue again, and she felt a growing need in her, building to an unstoppable ache.

“Ben?” she breathed, almost a plea, a yearning for something she didn’t know, but recognised she wanted desperately.

He emerged from between her thighs, flushed and panting, his face hungry, and it sent a thrill through her that he was hungry for her. He kissed his way back up her body, and as his hips slotted in the cradle of hers, she felt the blunt end of him press against her, right where she wanted it. She grabbed his hips, and gently bucked, trying to bring him more toward her, though he arched his
hips away, cursing in her ear.

“Rey, do you have protection?” he asked, a little strained and her mind blanked for a moment, before she felt relief.

“I’m on birth control” she murmured. She had given up thinking of it benefitting her in a sexual capacity, taking it to regulate her painful periods, but now she was gladder than ever. He nodded into her neck, but seemed somehow restrained.

“I’m clean, I was tested, a while ago, and there’s not been anyone in… not in a long time. We should stop though, if you’re not sure.” he murmured in her ear, and she realised what he was meaning.

“No, it’s ok. I trust you” she said, catching his face to look into his eyes, impressing her meaning on him with her full-hearted gaze.

“And I know I’m clean, though I’ve never been tested” she said, with a wry tilt to her lips, figuring she’d better warn him beforehand.

“What?” he breathed, before closing his eyes and stilling, and Rey felt a shot of panic. She bucked her hips again, rubbing against him, urging him to forget her words.

“Wait, we should – you need to think about this” he said slowly, with effort, as she attempted to shift the angle of her body, to better reach him.

“I’ve thought about this.” She argued.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” he said, cursing again as she managed to pull a shallow thrust from him, by siding down in his arms, and she gasped as she did, the intrusion everything she’d imagined and more.

“Yes, it is. So, start making it up to me” she demanded, gripping his face, which had turned from her. She stared him in the eye, not letting him sidle away and start blaming himself for another thing.

“Are you sure… are you sure you want it to be me?” he asked, and his hollow, unsure tone broke something in her.

“It was always going to be you, Ben. I chose you then, and I choose you now” she said simply, and then, he was kissing her. His hungry kisses filled her heart, as she felt him nudging to her entrance, and she squeezed his hips between her legs, urging him onwards. He slowly pushed into her, and she bit down on his shoulder, the sensation of being stretched so new and unimaginable. He paused partway in, and could feel his confidence wavering.

“Ben” she breathed, comforting, asking, pleading, she wasn’t even sure anymore. She reached down and gripped his hips as low as she could, as he lifted his face to look down at her, she was shocked to see moisture making his eyes shine, her own eyes reflected in his. She angled her hips, and pulled his hips toward her, making the decision for them both.

They both gasped when he was finally fully inside, his hips pressed tightly against hers. The pain was sharp and strange, and the feeling of fullness was intoxicating, even as she felt her muscles cramping around the intrusion, gripping and releasing, adjusting. Ben stayed stock still, it seemed as though every part of his body was clenched. She took a deep breath as he leaned down, and kissed the tears from her cheeks, sliding down without her notice.
“What happens next?” she whispered, and a sudden laugh shook his body, held carefully above her. He smiled down at her, his thumb brushing the stray hair sticking to her cheek tenderly away, before nudging his hips in and out a little.

“Ohh” Rey signed as the new sensation flooded over her. It was still painful, but not as much, and with every shallow stroke, the pain receded bit by bit.

She lost track of time as her world reduced down to the feel of Ben’s body above hers, inside her and all around her. His lips on her neck, his kisses brushed over her swollen lips, the steadily increasing thrusts of his hips, touching her deep inside, and then withdrawing, leaving her empty without him. She started to lift her hips a little to meet him longer thrusts, hearing him groan her name into her hair.

Suddenly, he shifted, lifting himself off her, and she grabbed onto his shoulders, though, before she knew if, he was kneeling, slipping back inside her, and lifting her hips with his hands. She was laid out before him, and she felt his dark eyes watching her every reaction. His strokes inside her were building in pace, now, the pain only a memory. He reached then to the place he had kissed her, the apex of nerves, hidden by hazel curls, and starting to stroke his thumb over that bundle of feeling, a consistent circle, making her hips jerk. He watched her start to come undone.

She had been reaching for something, an elusive, unknown feeling, and as she felt him moving deeply inside her, as well as his persistent fingers on her, she felt herself fall over the edge, chasing it.

Her orgasm ripped through her, a mixture of pain and pleasure, a sharp and intense storm of feeling. She froze there, rigid with the intensity of the new sensation. Ben suddenly lost his own rhythm and started to move erratically, his hips pushing in once more, twice, as she felt a warmth blossom inside her, and he leaned forward to press his face against her chest, her name spilling from his lips, a benediction in the firelight.

Bit by bit, she came back to herself. She felt different. She felt whole. Ben slowly pulled out of her, and she gasped as the pain rose for a moment and then faded again. His head was resting on her chest still, their limbs intertwined, heart beating the same rhythm. She stroked her fingers through his hair, and he traced patterns into the skin of her stomach.

There was too much emotion, too many things that had shown of themselves in the physical act of their connection, finally realised. Words felt unnecessary. She felt her eyes drift close, unable to keep them open anymore. She fell asleep with his smell around her, and his skin against hers, this man she had chosen. For so long, he had kept himself from darkness absolute, with nothing to hold onto, but perhaps the memory of who he’d used to be, to a girl who’d loved him. The darkness had been unopposed for so long, but not anymore, Rey thought, of the cusp of oblivion. Now there were two of them, and she wasn’t someone who gave up without a fight.

The pre-dawn light filtering in the tall windows gradually pulled Rey from her peaceful sleep. She stared at the high, ornate ceiling for a long moment, the previous night filtering back, as she felt a warm chest expand under her cheek. He’s thrown a couple of sheets and blankets over them in the night, as the fire had burned low. She marvelled that she wasn’t colder, given that they were laying
on the floor, but them, realised the heat Ben was giving off was almost making her too hot. She sat slowly, careful not to wake him. She clutched a sheet around her and shuffled carefully away, setting the arm that had been wrapped around her on the floor, his empty fingers grasping the air for her. She looked down at Ben, feeling her heart squeeze. He looked so young, asleep there, his face devoid of tension and worry, his forehead smooth and untroubled. She pushed herself gingerly to her feet, and wrapped the sheet around her, wandering over to the window. The ache between her thighs felt hard earned, and she smiled at the perfect, flame lit memory they’d made together.

The grounds of the house were bathed in a pink-grey dawn light, and shrouded by mist. Rey looked out at the peaceful morning, and felt the echo of it in her soul. She thought of the shadows of her past, carried with you, a weight, if you weren’t careful. She saw the shadow of her mother then, in the morning mist, by the stone fountain. She understood her better now, Rey realised. She could see the dark and scary things that you would do for love. Her mother had been flawed and violent, unpredictable and erratic, but she had burned more brightly than anyone Rey had ever known, and in her radiance, she had felt special.

She knew her mother had done what she’d had to, to stay with her as long as she had, and she’d made mistakes, but she’d always loved her. Her life had been full of hardship and suffering, and she had endured for Rey’s sake, as long as she had. She could resent her unorthodox childhood and the insecurities it had given her, but she realised, standing here in Ben’s huge house, surrounded by privilege and wealth, safety was not just a place, it could be a person too. Her mother had kept her safe, considering their lives, and in that way, she had showed her love. Yes, she’d left her, but it didn’t mean she’d wanted to, or that she hadn’t loved her. She watched that ghost of her heart in the grey morning, and let her anger and resentment go.

Ben moved behind her, and she turned and saw him watching her. The sheet pooling around his waist, his ruffled hair bushing the tops of his shoulders, his chest bare pale, banded with porcelain muscle, he was looking at her like she herself might be a ghost, his face boyish in the morning light. She realised then that she didn’t feel afraid. She knew all about waiting, and she could wait for Ben to come back.

He looked down at the sheets before him, his own, naked form, the hint of blood on his exposed thigh. He looks back at her, and she can already see his mind frantically working to catch up to get ahead, to regain control.

She already knew Ben wasn’t ready to come back to himself yet, to heal. But he had already shown her so much. He was in there, she knew it, and she wasn’t leaving him alone, not any more. There was only one way to do it, and Ben’s words returned to her from the community hall and their joined lesson to the girls. How to break that hold.

“You have to surrender” Ben had said.

“The attacker is not expecting your submission. If you submit, you surprise them, take them off guard, get under their defences…”

She walked to him on legs that were stronger than she had expected. It turns out, when something feels right, it’s much easier to be brave.

She knelt carefully, that twinge of pain between her legs reminding her of last night, and everything she had to fight for.
“Ben I accept your proposal. I agree to try it your way. With one condition” she said, surrendering with a grace that felt true in her heart and saw the look of utter shock enter his eyes. He frowned, his eyes running over her, questions brimming on his lips, even as the darker part of him, told him to forget that and accept. Lock it down.

“So, we are agreed” he settled on, lifting a large hand to touch her cheek.

“Rey, last night… I wish – I wish I could…” he struggled for the words, and she saw how his weakness cost him. He couldn’t be that man in the world yet, and she understood it, even as it broke her heart. And she saw his relief, that she wouldn’t ask more than he was capable of, that she wouldn’t make him chose between her and his sanity, the way he kept himself functioning.

“Thank you, for last night.” she said quietly, and saw the faintest smile come to his lips.

“Don’t you want to know the condition?” she asked carefully, she wanted him to be sure before agreeing. He shook his head resolutely.

“No, there is nothing you could ask of me that I wouldn’t do… to have you” he said honestly.

“I’m going to hold you to that” she promised as he eyed the sheet around her.

“You look like a Greek goddess in that thing” he murmured, running a hand possessively down her arm, and threading his fingers through hers, his eyes keeping on returning to her face, as though to make sure she was real.

“You’re really mine now?” he asked suddenly, with a sense of disbelief and wonder that made her heart swell.

“Depends… are you mine now too?” she challenged back as he easily lifted her onto his lap, her hand curving into that place above his heart, her head slotting into the space between his shoulder and his neck.

“I was always yours” he told her, pressing a kiss onto her upturned forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Ok here we are, the end of Act II, and I am officially exhausted!

This is a long one, and it's pretty much unabashed smut - if that's not your thing, I apologise, as it's basically 6000 words of it! I was going to warn before, but it seemed spoilery. hope you just skipped it - skipped right over it all.

Writing smut is not my favourite thing, I find it really difficult. I probably could have had all this happen in much fewer words, but that's just my writing style. I struggle with the vocabulary to use to make it feel genuine to the tone of the story and the pace etc.

Anyway, being Rey's first time, its her POV and I think she would take notice of everything that was happening, because it was all new for her. Also, I struggle with deciding if a virgin could... erm... arrive .... on her first time. My take on it in this story is she's not fumbling around with a teenage boy who also doesn't know what the hell to do - at this point, Ben knows what to do, and it's really
not that hard if you have experience of women... so I think he'd be able to get her there, also because I think trust and emotion has a large part to play, which is definitely there in Rey's first time.

For those wondering what could possibly be in store for Act III, even though Ben has had this loving experience with Rey, which is what she demanded and needed for her first time, he's in no way "fixed" or freed from the darkness inside him. Act III will be his reckoning, as I mentioned before, and sadly, it has angst planned a plenty. I know... I just can't help it.

Let me know if this lived up to expectations... I hope it did! And if you enjoyed the first 2 parts of this story! xxxx
Part III - I won't dance for anyone, but I would dance for you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part III

She took my heart, I think she took my soul

There was a flickering bulb, Rey noted absently, as she watched the reflection of the fluorescent strips in the window by the door, hour after hour. It wavered slightly, breaking her out her trance. Like the constant electronic hum of the machines around her, broken by the soft squeak of rubber soled shoes, occasionally passing the door of where she was holding her vigil. The chair she was curled in wasn’t made for sleeping, and she was sure her muscles would be complaining if she had been able to feel them, if she had been able to feel anything but the heavy numbness that had descended on her when she had rushed into the room days before.

She felt as though the images of the past few days had condensed into a loop of images that couldn’t stop playing through her mind, whether her eyes were open or closed. She saw the jug of wilting flowers on the table, already there before her watch had begun. She saw snaking cables and monitor pads stuck on bloodless skin. She saw dark hair, a splash of rich chocolate against the grey white of the sheets. The yellow and blue pattern of the chair made for day visitors and the hard-plastic rails of the bed.

She couldn’t look at the man in the bed beside her, could barely bring herself to glance at his still face, his shut eyes, her longing to see them open to her and meet her gaze, was almost overwhelming.

If she looked too long, she couldn’t stop her mind from tumbling back over the events that had led her to his bedside, at this moment. Once again, the past weighed on her shoulders and threatened to engulf her. Once again, she was crawling bruised and bloodied from the wreckage of a love fated to end in destruction, too desperate to endure, with a man too broken to heal.

“I’m sorry” she whispered, her vigil’s mantra.

“I’m so sorry”

4 months earlier
Kylo Ren was not a patient man. It had always plagued him, his need for immediacy, he thought he got it from his mother’s side of the family, his thoughts turning dark as his uncle’s face passed through his memory.

Three days since he had woken up beside Rey, and his fantasy had been made reality. Three days, since his heart had resumed its normal beat, after years of lying dormant in his withered chest.

And, three days since she had spoken to him.

He had gone with her to find her car, parked haphazardly at the wall on the edge of the property. She had kissed him hard, with intent, a caring look in her eye, a look he started to think he might need to see daily, and then left.

He had tried to get her to agree to drive back to the city with him, but she didn’t want to rush Jack, and in the end, he had relented. It had been a strange drive back, as his mind had veered between elation and disbelief. That night, alone in bed, looking around the room that would soon be theirs, he had called her. *Theirs.* Just the thought made his mouth dry.

It had rung endlessly, before switching to voicemail. He hated talking on the phone as it was, never mind leaving messages, and so hung up. He had deliberated over whether to follow up with a message, but in the end, simply threw the offending phone on his bedside table and went to sleep. Well, he tried to, he really did, but all he could do was listen for the phone.

It didn’t ring. It was a long night.

Five days later, he had started to have the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, that Rey had changed her mind. Changed her mind about their deal. About him. What hurt the most, was how unsurprised he was by it.

Of course, Rey wouldn’t allow herself to participate in the fantasy he had concocted for them. Agreeing to live with him, and be with him, it was the stuff of sloppy romance and lifetime movies. Beauty had fled her beast, right after the opening credits, and saved herself a lot of hassle, and in the end, he couldn’t blame her. He was ashamed of himself for even believing it in the first place, for proposing it with a straight face. But, he had that night of her, to remember. That perfect night, where he had just been himself, without artifice or shame, without the feeling of being too broken or soiled to be touched by such, pure, shining light as Rey.

In his worst moments, he agonised over whether she regretted it, the thought making him sick. She had been so sure, her decisions made, but maybe he should have held back. Maybe she blamed him.

These dark thoughts rolled around his head, stewed in him, for several days, and one more unanswered call later, until he finally gave up and texted her.

Now, two days had passed without reply, and he thought he might go mad. That was surely the reason he found himself at her door, hesitating pathetically. She might be angry to see him there, might tell him to leave. He was prepared for that, he was ready. At least he’d know she was ok. At least then, if he could just see her face once, he’d know if she did blame him, if being with him was a regret that would sting him forever.

Taking a steadying breath, he knocked and waited. There was no noise in the apartment, and as the minutes stretched long, he suddenly wondered if she had even come back from upstate yet. Feeling a momentary reprieve, he turned to leave, just as the door snapped a couple of inches open, the security chain in place.
Rey heard the knock at the door, but found it hard to distinguish between that, and the monster migraine that had been knocking her brain around in her skull for the last 15 minutes following a highly exhausting coughing fit.

She finally heaved herself out of bed and trailed along the corridor, her thickest and roomiest flannel pyjamas shuffling along with her as she went, trailing a hand along the wall to keep her balance. She reached the door and cracked it open.

There he stood, perfect and unruffled, if not a little tired looking, in his black suit, not a hair out of place.

“Ben?” wondering if it was her turn to start imagining him in places. He looked surprised to see her, an expression that was quickly followed by hurt, and then, as he looked closer, concern.

“Rey, what’s wrong, you look dreadful” he said, his winged brows drawing in over worried eyes.

“Nothing, just… a little cold” she muttered, and then broke off as a new wave of racking coughs passed over her.

“Rey – open the door” Ben commanded, and she avoided his stern gaze, turning her bleary eyes to the wall beside his face, which suddenly seemed to be floating.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll make you sick so you better just go” she gasped out. Maybe she was being unfair, but she hated for him to see her like this, for him to be there for the sticking snot, and globules of dark green phlegm, like chewing gum, that she managed to periodically hack up her aching windpipe, not to mention her unwashed face and well… unwashed everything, greasy hair, bloodshot eyes. The list went on.

“Rey – now” he growled, and before she knew it, her hand was rising to the chain. Just following the arrangement, she told herself, but as he stepped inside and shut the door quickly behind him, the cool chill of air from the hall immediately ceasing, she knew that wasn’t the only reason. He immediately wrapped his too long arms around her, and she practically melted into the comfort.

The truth was, she was sick and alone, and the thought of Ben taking care of her was pretty damn good.

“Why haven’t you been answering my calls?” he demanded straight away. She blinked at him.

“You only called once”

“Twice” he ground out, visibly irritated he had to remind her of that.

“Ok, twice… I’ve been sleeping a lot, and I don’t know, everything is blurry” she admitted.

“Where is Catherine?” he demanded, his eyes shooting around the extremely empty flat.

“Gone, to her new job” Rey said.

“So, you’re here alone, with a raging fever and what sounds like a nasty chest infection?” Ben
asked, his face looked so angry at her, she couldn’t help but giggle, which sent off a series of rusty sounding coughs, deep in her chest.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be mad at the ill person, everybody knows that” she said, poking a finger into his chest. She felt dizzy, with the migraine pressing like a clamp around her temples. She shivered violently for a second, and almost bit her tongue in surprise as Ben swept her up into his arms. He went walked down the hall, peering into Catherine’s empty room, and then continuing to hers. He stalked inside, anger still radiating off his shoulders, at odds with the tender, painfully careful way he placed her on the mattress and drew her duvet back over her.

“What are you taking for the fever?” he asked, surveying her bedside table, which currently held a mug of stone cold tea and two paracetamol tablets, popped from their packet and an unopened bottle of water.

“Tylenol…I can’t remember when, maybe last night?” she asked, closing her eyes against the bedside light he had snapped on.

“These ones?” he asked, holding up two pills.

“How did they get there?” she asked, confused for a moment.

“Oh, I remember” she said, her brow clearing, watching as Ben sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

“I forgot to take them” she said simply, snuggling further under the covers. He glowered at her.

“Don’t… it’s hard to think with this… headache” she said, the pincher of the migraine making her eyes feel like they might pop out.

“That’s because of the fever” he said, a little less than patiently. He picked up an unopened bottle of water beside her table and twisted the cap, offering it to her.

“Here, take them now” he instructed.

“So bossy” she muttered, her nose scrunching as the dry taste of the pills filled her mouth as she took an age to wash them down her swollen throat.

“Sore throat too?” he asked, concern colouring his strict tone.

‘Sore everything” she admitted, sinking back into the pillows, feeling the pills wash around in her empty stomach.

‘Have you eaten?”

“Not hungry”

“Rey” she was beginning to like the way he growled her name, frustration building each time.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were feeling ill?”

“I’m not used to answering to anyone”

“It’s not answering to someone to ask for help” he said, and she pulled a face at his rejected tone. She wanted to tell him the truth, that she didn’t want him connecting their night together with her getting soaked to the bone and catching the flu. She didn’t want him in her apartment, seeing her broken down living space, even more sparse than usual after the break in, seeing her private,
personal things, while she lay comatose in bed. She wanted to show him the things that were important to her and explain them. And, she really didn’t want him to see her like this, as vain as it was.

“Sorry” she whispered, and saw how the word had an immediate effect, as his tense shoulders gradually dropped a little.

“This is the very thing we agreed on… that you would submit to me, and let me take care of you”

“I’m an adult, I can take care of myself” she argued softly, feeling more and more tired as she tried to have a real conversation, despite the burning of her prickling skin.

“You’re doing a great job so far” he said, his expression making it clear he didn’t consider her sick bed attempts at medical care adequate.

“I’m fine. You can’t wrap me up in cotton wool…” she muttered, and froze as Ben’s fingers met her cheek, softly, a feather light brush over her fevered skin. She looked at him to find him watching her closely.

“We’ll see” he murmured, his eyes moving over her face, memorising every feature anew. It struck her that he looked less tired than he had when she’d opened the door.

“Yes, we will see” Rey answered back, unable not to challenge him, even prostrate and weak as she was. He smiled, a crooked and perfect smile that might have heated her skin even more.

“Close your eyes” he instructed suddenly, standing, and moving off into the living room. Rey felt his absence immediately. She curled on her side and attempted to sleep a bit, but her nose kept running, and she couldn’t stop coughing. Maybe she did drift off after a while, because when she awoke, there was a bowl of steaming soup on a tray beside her, and Ben was settling on the bed alongside her, sitting tall against her many pillows, his long frame dwarfing the modest structure. She looked up at him a long moment, struck by how incredibly right it felt, to have him here.

“I knew food would wake you, my little scavenger” Ben murmured, as she struggled to sit up on weak arms. He pulled her back, so she was supported against him, her rattling chest cradled in his arms, and then pulled the tray to her lap. She attempted to lift the container, and gasped as she found the liquid too hot, burning her fingers through the plastic.

He took it off her, and held it beneath her chin, disregarding the heat. She picked up a spoon, and took a sip of the hot, fragrant chicken broth.

“Hhhmmm” she made the noise in the back of her throat, feeling the hot liquid soothe her tired chest and neck.

“What is it?” she asked after a few more mouthfuls. It was clearly chicken noodle soup, but unlike any she’d ever had before.

“Pho. It’s Vietnamese.” He said, tilting the container so she could get more out of it. She murmured her approval and continued to quickly polish off the bowl. Her stomach filled, the warmth of the soup spreading through her veins, she collapsed back on his chest weakly, as he put the bowl and spoon down on the bedside table. He then shifted so her head was comfortably pillowed on his broad chest, and wrapped his hands around her stomach, her body curved into the crook of his arm. The upright angle stopped her coughing, and with the feeling of his heart beating against her back, she fell back into a dreamless slumber.
Rey lost track of time. She was aware of light shifting over the walls of her bedroom, sometimes silver moonlight and shining sun. Hot cups of tea and cold trips to the bathroom. Her bedside table turning into a pharmacy of sorts, crowded with cough drops, nasal sprays and a brand shiny new humidifier. Ben’s chest under her cheek and his hand sorting through her hair, unwashed for days on end now.

Eventually, what felt like weeks later, she opened her eyes, and they were clear. Her headache had shifted, leaving only the faintest memory of the vice like grip of pain. Her chest was tender, but better, and she felt energy running through her veins for the first time in a week. She squinted at the clock, and happy to see it was only morning, though exactly how many days she had been confined to her sick bed, she wasn’t sure. She also wasn’t sure, just how alone she was. She listened for another sign of life in the apartment, straining to hear. At length, she heard the softest murmur of a masculine voice, coming closer to her open door and her heart leapt.

“Finn!” she breathed, as her best friend came into view, only the slightest pang that it wasn’t the dark haired, towering spectre of her feverish dreams. An exuberant smile lit up Finn’s face.

“Rey, man, you were really out of it for a while” he said, coming to sit beside her on the bed. She moved to make space as he cuddled her in, draping his heavy arm along her shoulders.

“What day is it?” she asked.

“It’s Thursday.”

“Wow, I can barely remember the last few days” she mused, chewing her lip, glancing over at the collection of medicines on the table top, with only the vaguest memory of Ben’s hands on her face, his voice urging her to take this and that, as she pushed him away and grumbled.

“Yeah, you’ve been a treat” Finn joked, laughing at her murderous expression for a moment.

“Don’t worry though, Solo took most of the heat” he said, and Rey’s eyes shot to his in surprise.

“You spoke to …. Ben?”

“Sure did. I can’t believe we never actually met, back in high school, considering how hung up on him you were”

“Was not” she muttered, a token at best.

“He called you?” she asked finally.

“Yeah, he had to head into work, he didn’t want you to be alone” Rey dropped her head back and stared at the ceiling.

“So – are you two… giving it another shot?” Finn asked after a long moment and Rey thought hard about how to answer that.

“I suppose, you could say that… in a way” she said, and Finn shifted so he could look down into her eyes, his own warm brown ones narrowed at her elusive answer.

“In what way?” Finn prodded, and Rey bit her lip a moment, considering what to tell him.
“He asked me to move in with him” she said finally, and saw shock widen Finn’s dark eyes.

“Damn, he’s eager! What’d you tell him? I hope you let him down gently” He teased, and Rey paused a moment too long before laughing with him. Finn’s smile slowly dropped into disbelief.

“You are going to move in with him? Isn’t that a bit fast?”

“Fast is an understatement, believe me, I know.” Rey said, shifting a little away from Finn, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. She could practically feel his worry and confusion behind her. She glanced back at him over her shoulder and gave him a tentative smile.

“Don’t look so serious… I’m young and impulsive, it’s not a big deal” she said. Finn watched her carefully, sitting back against the cushions and crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“Yeah, except it is, and you’re not. Is everything ok? You’re not… you know…” Finn was saying, his eyebrows lowered, his voice gentle.

“No, Finn. I don’t know. What?” she said obtusely.

“Pregnant, you’re not pregnant, are you? Because if you are it’s fine, you can tell me, and we can work out the next step” he finally said.

“No, Finn, I’m not pregnant, and I wasn’t aware that we lived in a time where people had to live together if the girl got knocked up” she said, without anger, standing finally, hating the weak feeling in her limbs.

“We don’t! Of course, I just… it’s out of character” he finished, standing also, and gently catching her arm as she started toward the door.

Rey paused, seeing genuine worry cloud her best friends features, which was exactly why she was afraid of telling him. She let out a deep breath.

“It’s out of character because I’ve never felt like this about a man except Ben. Then and now, and all the time in between.” Rey explained. Finn’s eyes searched hers and must have found honesty there, because he broke into a real smile.

“Rey in love. That’s going to take a little getting used to”

“I’m not in love. I care about him, that’s all, for now”

“You care about Poe… this is something else.” He said, assessing her reaction to his words, a slight staining of her cheeks as they heated.

“Stop it”

“Rey’s in love” He teased further, receiving a whack to the chest in return.

“Urg, you’re the worst”
Ben carried the bag of steaming food up the stairs of Rey’s building, the vapour tickling his fingers as he went. He wondered if she was up and about yet, if she’d eaten. He wondered if she’d be happy to see him. He couldn’t shake the feeling of rejection that had settled deeply into his bones at the realisation that Rey hadn’t reached out to him when she was sick. Instead, she had holed up, alone, in her apartment to suffer in silence. He didn’t know much about relationships, well, healthy ones at least, but he was sure you usually found the presence of your partner a comfort, instead of something to avoid.

He slipped the key he’d had made into the lock and entered, surprised to find the lights in the kitchen still on, and further still to see the table set for two. He wondered for a moment if Rey’s friend Finn might still be here, and already started to invent reasons he could get rid of him, when a movement in the hall stilled his running mind.

Rey stood there, dressed in warm joggers and a jumper, thick socks, and her hair was pulled back in her three buns. She had showered and changed it seemed, and she was looking at him with a bright, awake expression, something he hadn’t seen since their night upstate. She pulled her sleeves down over her hands, and lingered in the hall suddenly seeming shy, a very different look for the Rey he knew.

“Hi” she said quietly, as he laid the dinner bag on the table and approached her.

“Hey” he replied, unable to run his eyes over her, newly well and tremendously desirable.

“You came back” she stated, stepping bit by bit closer, looking up into his face, her own freshly scrubbed and looking innocent and determined. He wanted to take it between his hands and kiss her senseless, but held back. He looked for signs that she wanted him to leave. Her eyes flickered to the table behind him, and he felt relief as her eyes alighted on the bag, and a tentative smile lit her face.

“And I brought dinner” he confirmed, stepping aside and gesturing to the table. She smiled gratefully at him, and passed by, so close, her side brushed the back of his hand, and he had to stop himself from reaching out to touch her. She was rummaging in the bag on the table, exclaiming over the food with excitement.

“You’re staying for dinner, right?” she suddenly asked, turning to look at him over her shoulder. He realised he was still standing near the door, coat on, keys in hand. There was something so certain in her tone, his reply fell from his lips unchecked.

“Of course” he said as he shrugged out his jacket and hung it up, before going to the cupboard and taking some plates down. She narrowed her eyes at his actions.

“Made yourself at home, I see” she teased.

“Should I not have?” he asked, his light tone belaying the nerves he felt at her teasing, and sitting down at the table and enjoying the proximity to Rey it brought him.

“You let yourself in?” she asked, glancing at him from the side.

“It seemed expedient to have a key made” he said, watching her expression carefully.
“I can return it—“

“No. It’s fine” she said quickly, and shot him another quick glance, before sitting across from him, and starting to pile food from the open containers on her plate. He couldn’t help the smile that surged to his lips at her response.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she asked suddenly, and he took up his plate, and followed her lead, watching as she ate enthusiastically, captivated as always by the larger than life approach Rey took to everything. She ate like it was her last meal, and he remembered now, how she always had. Chewing quickly, with great determination, and a single-minded purpose to defeat her hunger, Ben watched Rey with a tremendous softening in his chest.

“What?” she said suddenly, breaking him from his silent observation. He cleared his throat and reached for the rice.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, to break the silence. Rey watched him a moment, and then resumed her feasting.

“Better, thanks to you” she said shortly, and gave him a swift grin. Ben kept his gaze lowered and continued to eat. He was uncomfortable with the thanks, and unsure why.

“It was nothing”

“No, it wasn’t” Rey disagreed, setting down her fork to stare at him. He was aware of her stare on the side of his face, could feel that sensation spreading across his cheek and neck, and was unwilling to turn and meet her gaze.

It rankled, her giving him thanks for something so fundamental. Like it was a favour, something temporary. It was hardly the words of a woman who had agreed to let him take care of her.

He abruptly pushed his chair back, and went to the fridge, opening it and staring inside. A long silent moment passed, and then he heard the soft scrape of another chair. He tensed as he felt Rey approach him.

“Ben, what’s going on?” she asked, so much closer than he’d like. He felt her hand pushing the fridge door closed, and then tentatively touching his arm. That touch pulled him like a magnet, his eyes finally snapping to hers.

“Why can’t I thank you for taking care of me?”

“Why do you feel like you have to?” he bit out, pushing down all the words that threatened to bubble up. Why hadn’t she called him, why was she pushing him away, when they were supposed to finally be on the same page? Had she changed her mind?

“I don’t have to, I want to” Rey insisted stubbornly, watching emotions chase across his face, on display, despite his best efforts.

“Well, I don’t want it” he said, shrugging her hand off and going for his coat. His emotions were too close to the surface, a bubbling, writhing mass of insecurity and weaknesses. He tried to mask it, as he had so often in the years apart, but here, under her gaze, as always, he was completely open and exposed.

“Ben – what’s happening?” Rey asked, her voice confused, and he looked at her to see her hugging herself, looking small but defiant, and his anger crumbled even as his fear surged.
“You tell me, Rey. I thought… I thought we had reached an agreement… I thought we were past formal thank yous for something a boyfriend would do without question” he said, and was almost as startled as Rey seemed by the words. She recovered before him though, and was stalking up to him, her face staring up at his.

“Are you my boyfriend then? I don’t know what to call us, I thought you were the one making all the rules”

“I don’t know, am I? Have you changed your mind?” he asked bluntly, catching a fleeting look of understanding pass over her beautiful features.

“No. Have you?” she said steadily and he let out a long breath.

“Never. I’ll never change my mind about you” he said, softening finally, the fear slowly leaking away, not gone, but lessened. He reached out and tucked a tendril of hair that had escaped her bun, behind her ear, and she gave him a small smile.

“I don’t have much experience with any of this” Rey admitted.

“Neither do I” he replied softly.

“More than me, I bet” she argued back, as he stepped into her space slowly. He didn’t stop when he reached her, and she took a step back as his chest pressed into hers.

“You’d be surprised” he said, walking her backwards around the table. She narrowed her eyes at him as she backed away, coming up against the wall. He continued until he had her trapped against it.

“Well… I thought you were going to tell me what to do… or order me around or something” Rey said, and Ben was surprised to hear a hoarse tone to her voice that almost undid him.

He raised his hands slowly up her body, fingers lightly brushing her sides on the way, to frame her shoulders and cage her in, leaning his face nearer to hers, and seeing the pulse in her neck jump higher and higher. She whetted her lips as her eyes scoured his face.

“Do you want me to tell you what to do, Rey?” he asked quietly, running his eyes over her forehead and down over her lips, back to her eyes and then lower again, to her collarbones just peeping through the zip of her sweatshirt.

“I don’t know… maybe” she breathed, and her words and her tone made his body flush and harden simultaneously.

“Or, maybe I just want… you” she said, raising her eyes to his, and branding him through with her feeling and intent.

It was the words that undid him, unravelling any careful control he had painstakingly built up over the past days, being near her, and yet, holding himself apart, separate.

His hands flew to her hips, as her hands reached for his shoulders and then, she was jumping into his arms, her thighs gripping his waist and the wall was something for him to press her into as her mouth met his.

Gone was the gentle seduction of their first time, the quiet permission and soulful exchange.

This kiss was fire and passion, a flame so hot, it was all he could do to keep up, as his hands moved
of their own volition across her waist, rubbing hard circles into her thighs, sliding from her shoulders to her breasts, ripping the zip of the hoodie down to her navel, pushing it back off her shoulders as she arched her back to make it easier. Her mouth had moved from his mouth and across his cheek, now settling on his ear, as she breathed hot gasps against the skin there, before her mouth closed around his ear lobe and sucked it against her tongue, nipping with her teeth.

He pulled back in surprise and looked at Rey, hair tousled, clothes askew, her eyes wide with desire.

Desire for him.

With a groan, he pulled her back off the wall and turned toward her bedroom, holding her hard against him the entire way, pushing open the door with his foot roughly and then dropped her onto the bed, already sinking down to cover her as she landed.

Rey let out a laugh at the unceremonious nature of their landing, as he leaned over her, grinning, reaching up to help her tear his shirt away, and strip her trousers off, when she started to cough.

She coughed and coughed, and Ben shifted back to give her room as she sat up, her slender body shaking with the effort. He leaned by her side, and raised a hand to rub slow, warm circles against her chest as she continued to cough, finally tapering into small gasps as she attempted to get her breath back. Her face was red, her eyes watering as she finally surfaced from the fit. He passed her a glass of water from the bedside.

“Please just ignore that, and pretend I did something even vaguely sexy instead” she muttered, almost seeming embarrassed, which was something Ben couldn’t fathom. That Rey might consider anything she did as being unattractive to him was so utterly ridiculous.

“I think sexy needs to be rescheduled. You need to rest” he said, as Rey shot him a mutinous look.

“I’ve been resting. I don’t want to rest anymore… I want to do – things” she finished, running her eyes over his body, curled next to hers on the bed. His body clenched in reaction to her blatant regard.

“What things?” he asked, his voice just a rough whisper. Rey watched him raptly, and Ben recognised the mischievous glint in her eye, before she leaned onto his chest and ran her hand down the hard panes of his stomach to his belt, which she attempted to unbuckle.

“You” she murmured, and suddenly swung a leg over him, straddling him and trapping his arms down.

“You have a duty to make an ill person feel better” she said, her fingers dancing over his chest and framing his face, then losing themselves in his hair. He had no intention of pushing her when she was still recovering, but her position gave him a wicked thought, that he was quick to implement, before she could stop him. He brought his hands up to her bottom, still covered by the thin layer of her underwear, hovering enticingly above his chest.

“That is a very sacred duty, I take it very seriously” he said, gripping handfuls of her bottom in his hands, and moving a little down the bed, so her thighs were bracketing his head, and his mouth was perfectly aligned.

“Ben?” Rey breathed, as he pressed his tongue through her lace underwear, the sudden shock of hot and wet against her, making her thighs quiver. He hooked a finger in her panties and pulled them to the side. She squirmed, and he stopped, holding her hard and still, looking up at her fiercely from
between her thighs.

“Rey – when I tell you to hold still – you hold still” He commanded, breathing her scent deeply, his lips brushing against her, as he spoke and feeling her muscles jolt above him.

“Is that an order?” she asked, looking hazily down at him.

“Damn right… now do it” he instructed as he pulled her back against his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Song - Dance for You by Rachel D'Arcy and Closer by Kings of Leon

Hi everyone, I'm back! Took a wee hiatus, thank you so much for your messages and comments. Hope to be back to a regular posting schedule soon.

Let me know what you think!
Ben watched as Rey directed the mover with a smile, hovering over the boxes holding her art supplies like they contained irreplaceable crystal. He couldn’t stop looking at her, couldn’t get used to the image of Rey, here, in his house, in his life.

She was chatting to his neighbours in the elevator, and making friends with the security men downstairs, so she got a pleasant greeting in the morning, instead of the stiff, professional façade he’d been getting for years.

She had chatted to the taxi driver about the music on the radio on the way over from her apartment, while Ben had sat in silence, watching her, the way her hands moved when she talked, and her whole body shifted forward on the seat. Then, when they’d pulled up at his address, and she’d looked a little nervously at him.

“We’re home” he’d said, barely considering the words before they’d sprung from his lips, hardly realised how good it felt to call it that, and even more alarming to realise he hadn’t really felt that way about it in all the years he’d lived there. Had he had a home, since he’d been a teenager, in love and terrified, he couldn’t say now.

Then Rey had touched his hand and smiled at him.

“Well then, let’s go” she’d said, with a soft smile.

Now, she was taking over his house, with the intent of creating a “personality” from the “emotionless, sterile, monk-like” space he’d lived in.

He’d decided to work from home, to keep an eye on the movers and such, well, that was what he’d told Rey. Maybe he just hadn’t been able to wait to see her moving in, becoming a part of his every day.

Rey jumped as one of the boxes fell, and he looked up in alarm, watched her, effortlessly stunning in her far too tight and far too memorable yoga pants, and hoodie, her hair in her three buns, something he remembered from long ago. She was bending over the box, laughing with the man who’d dropped it, reassuring him.

He looked back to his computer, tried to focus. It was next to impossible, the excitement wriggling in the pit of his stomach made almost any other focus incomprehensible.

The words of Hux’ latest email swarm in front of his eyes, before he gave up all pretence, and snapped the laptop lid closed. He turned his attention to the hall, which opened into the large, open plan kitchen of his apartment, which was currently home to most of Rey’s earthly belongings. It
was a meagre collection, six boxes at most, and it hurt his heart a little. Rey should have the world, everything she wanted and more. He wished she’d let him give it to her, but already knew she wouldn’t. Gone were the days when a scared teenager had horded cast off bobbles. Rey knew her worth wasn’t in possessions, and the strength of that called to him.

“Is that you finished working?” she called to him, and he realised he had been caught in his inspection.

“For now” he said, setting his work to the side and standing.

“Well, then, why don’t you make yourself useful and come with me” she said smartly over her shoulder as she disappeared into his room. He followed, reaching out for her immediately once they were past the opening of the door, his hands easily catching her waist and lifting her back against his chest.

“Can’t wait to be alone?” he murmured into her neck as he pressed his lips against her skin and she froze in his arms. After a moment, her hand came up and twinned into his hair, caressing for a regretfully short moment, before she tugged him away, and wriggled out his reach, stepping away toward the wardrobe and giving him a narrow stare.

“Stop trying to distract me. We need to talk about storage” she said, as Ben approached her slowly, his eyes running up and down her, his intent clear on his face. She backed away a couple of steps toward the mirrored doors, and then stopped, raising a hand before her.

“Where am I to put my things?” she demanded, as he breached the distance between them, and placed his hands atop her shoulders lightly.

“Wherever you want” he said, concentrating on brushing his fingers up and down the sensitive skin there, happy to be rewarded with her shiver, the skin pimpling under his calloused fingertips.

“What does that mean?” she said a little frustrated sounding, as she tilted her head to the side and let him lower his lips back to her neck, pressing soft kisses, trailing his stubble, drawing a sharp intake of breath from her.

“It means, this is your home now… our home. You don’t need me to give you permission to change anything” he said, reaching her ear. She reached out to grip his arms, swaying a little in his grip.

“I thought you liked being asked for permission” she said, and he felt the heat of that statement surge in him.

“Not in this, never in this. I want you to feel at home here Rey” he said, leaning back to catch her eye. He didn’t tell her how her very presence was making a home out of the house he had lived in for years, how she was leaving trails of technicolour in her wake, storming through his monotone life. To do so would be too much, to do so would make him too vulnerable, and so he settled for kissing her.

“When are the movers leaving?” he asked roughly, several moments later, as she pulled back to look at him, her chest moving unsteadily, her eyes unfocused and soft. She smiled.

“When we’re done, so don’t even think of chasing them off before” she said, and squeezed past him, moving back to the kitchen, and leaving him to follow. He glanced at the clock and realised it was well past lunchtime, and since he didn’t seem like he was going to be getting any more work done, pulled a bottle of champagne from the fridge.
“Shall we celebrate?” he asked, as Rey opened a box full of empty Tupperware containers and started opening cupboards, looking for a place to put them. She caught his curious gaze on them and stood up, reaching for her glass of bubbles.

“They’re useful for leftovers and packed lunches.” She said, glancing down at the collection of mismatched containers.

“Why wouldn’t you just get fresh food?” he asked, and instantly felt annoyed at himself as she crossed her arms over her chest defensively.

“Because it’s expensive… and this way, you don’t even have to leave your office for lunch, maybe you wouldn’t even have to interact with anyone at all, all day… can you even imagine it!” she said lightly, and he relaxed, glad she hadn’t chosen to focus on his callousness.

“That certainly sounds advantageous” he agreed. She leaned against the counter next to him, her causal closeness making him aware of how little human contact he had allowed himself, or been allowed, in a long time.

“When should we start to move Jack, I know he has a hospital appointment on Monday. If he’s ready to go, tomorrow might not be a bad day to get started” Ben said, eager to make Rey’s move permanent, and ease her access to her uncle.

“We can’t, we’re busy tomorrow afternoon” Rey said, and he caught the little glance she shot him through her lashes, even as his heart sped up at her use of *we*.

“It’s time you fulfil the condition of this whole thing, now you’ve succeeded in uprooting me from my comfortable and beloved home”

“In the worst neighbourhood in the city” he grunted, taking a sip of the chilled white wine he’d poured them.

“Oh Ben, you have no idea, there’s more to New York than the Upper West side” she said lightly.

“I’m aware, now, what’s the condition” he said, recognising a Rey style divergence from topic. She turned to lean over the countertop, arranging fruit in a bowl on the counter in front of her, and spoke without turning.

“We are going to see your mother. I assume you know the address, I didn’t bother checking it, but Margot can always-” she trailed off as the distinct sound of glass breaking filled the room. She spun around and gaped at him.

“You did not just crush that beautiful glass because you’re scared of your mom. What are we, 5?” she snapped, her brow crossing with concern as she approached and took the pieces of glass from him, laying them on the counter. He looked down, feeling that familiar detachment echoing through him.

She tutted as she pulled open his palm and emptied glass pieces from it. He didn’t know how to explain her that pain was how he dealt with things, the way he’d been taught.

“Does it hurt?” she murmured, raising those beautiful hazel eyes to his, and he felt his heart resume beating. He shook his head, and let her lead him to the sink and run his hand under the tap.

“That’s your condition? We have to meet my mother?”

“No, that’s one of the ways in which you can meet the condition” she said, glancing up at him. He
narrowed his eyes at her, waiting for the axe to fall.

“Rey – what’s the condition?” he ground out, already knowing he wasn’t going to like it. She chewed on her lip as she wrapped a piece of kitchen roll around the hand, blotting carefully, checking for any slithers of glass, and finally letting it fall when she was satisfied.

“The condition is to re-establish a relationship with your mother”

He swallowed and it felt as though the glass from the counter had jumped into his gullet.

“Rey-“ he started, trying to figure how he could make her understand that it was impossible. That it would be like to having two ghosts to tea, three actually, as he was sure the memory of Han Solo would also be present. She crossed her arms over her chest, raising her chin in the obstinate set that he had become quite addicted to.

“Ben Solo, that was the condition of my accepting your proposal… are you telling me now that you won’t do it? Because I should call the movers back now, and I can be gone by dinner” she said. He whetted his lips, watching her magnificent display. He stepped closer to her, lowering his voice to the timbre that sent her skin into goose bumps.

“You are supposed to be submitting to me, I seem to remember that being part of the agreement” he growled and he saw the most beautiful pink flush suffused Rey’s smooth, tan cheeks.

“I am, well, I will… once you order me to do something” she said, trying to brush off his words, even as her eyes looked at him curiously. He smiled and stepped closer, backing her into the counter, pressing his hips into hers. She watched him raptly.

“What would you want me to order you to do?” he said, his voice a rough purr, and that delicious flush bled to her neck.

Someone cleared their throat, just as Rey was bringing her hands up to touch his chest, and he bit down a groan of disappointment.

“What?” he practically barked at the mover who had reappeared.

“Erm, there’s some boxes that say dojo on them-“ he said, and Rey snapped up straight.

“Right! I’ll be right there” she said and pushed Ben away with her hips, shooting him a little triumphant smile as she made to pass him.

“There won’t always be someone around to save you, Rey” he murmured in her ears, delivering a smack to her bottom as she passed, making her give a disgruntled yelp, before she turned, walking confidently backwards, her eyes dancing with her usual spirit.

“Promise?” she called to him, before turning and moving with the mover down the hall.
“Where is Kylo Ren. I expected to go over this report with him” Snoke’s voice always sent a shiver of distaste down Hux’s spine, and this time was no different. He forced himself not to drop the old man’s gaze, as repulsive as it was.

“He was detained at home, it seems, that was all he saw fit to tell his assistant” Hux sniffed. Snoke pondered that, his eyes turning to the monitor of Ren’s empty office, an expression of longing fleeing across his features a moment.

“No matter, I am sure he will return to his duties presently. In his absence, you may suffice to fulfil his void. Now, get me him on the line. I’ll see what’s keeping him from his responsibilities.” Snoke said, and Hux swallowed hard, cursing Kylo Ren more than usual.

Rey walked around Ben’s apartment, marvelling at the new additions. When she had been there before, it had only been the one apartment and it was all she’d seen of it when she’d come the night after her run in with Plutt. Now, exploring properly, she could see where they’d merged his apartment and the apartment next door. Ben had added on another bathroom and a dojo type room, which Rey already loved.

There was another bedroom as well, though it was completely devoid of personality, a study of black and white, and looked completely pristine. The other bathroom was another matter. Modelled in Ben’s preferred Asian influenced style, it hosted a large sunken bathtub and walk in shower. Positioned next to the dojo, she imagined he used it to soak tired muscles, ease the aches and pains of exercising.

She took her staff from the wall in the new space, and ran through some stretches with it, before becoming aware of a presence at the door, watching her. She turned and saw Ben, lounging against the door frame, deceptively casual, there seemed a tenseness to his stance, like he was acting, keeping himself tightly reigned in.

“Problems at work?” she asked after a long moment where they merely stared at each other across the space.

His face was dark, closed off, different to the smiles he had given her earlier. She supposed the work call had been the cause, and her thoughts turned to Snoke. There was so little she knew about the man and his current relationship with Ben. Did Ben have to interact with his abuser daily? How did Snoke treat him? All these questions threatened to bubble up inside her and burst out, but she supressed them. Ben wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready. She could feel the taint of his teachers
influence on him like a miasma, draped across his shoulders, clouding Ben from her, making the man he called Kylo Ren appear.

“Ben?” she said quietly, wondering how to bring him out of the dark place he had retreated to.

“It’s time Rey, time to make good on our agreement. It’s just us now.” He said lowly and she was horrified to feel a thrill of fear, hand in hand with a pulse of excitement throb through her. She stood hesitantly, afraid and intrigued all at once. He walked slowly forward and she couldn’t tear her eyes from his predatory grace. He stopped in front of her, looming over her, and then stilled. She raised her eyes to look at him, and immediately felt his fingers on her jaw, forcing her chin down, her eyes following, until she was looking at a point in his chest. She waited until that pressure had lessened and then looked up again, testing his meaning. Again, he wordlessly forced her face down, and she let it stay there this time. His heart was beating hard, she could see his pulse jumping in his throat.

“Hold still” he instructed roughly, at odds with the gentle way he brought both hands up to frame her neck, resting his hands lightly on her collarbones. The tension between them was thick and electric as he slowly circled her, his hands on her throat the entire time, his face brushing her hair now and then. He’d stopped behind her, she could feel the heat from his body just behind her, a furnace of need and anger. His hands moved lazily from her neck and down to her shoulders, and then her waist, his fingers tucking under the hem of her top, and then tugging upwards, sweeping it up and off over her head. Her arms fell back to her sides as he loosened her hair from behind, and then she felt those insistent fingers unclasp her bra from behind and slide the straps down her arms. She swallowed hard, the cool air meeting her bare skin, her naked back pressed flush against his clothed chest. She felt exposed, which she supposed was the point, and shivered at the strange, dragging sensation it gave her, embarrassment and desire melding together.

She felt his hot breath on the nape of her bent neck, her hair brushing her shoulders, each minuscule stimulation sending tidal waves of heat through her. His hands slowly ghosted down her arms, trailing fire in their wake, until they reached her own fingers, and tugged them up to her chest, closing them over her breasts, her hands wrapped in his.

“Touch yourself” he instructed from behind her, and then, his hands were pulling away. She stood, gripping her breast lamely in the absence of his guiding presence. She closed her eyes, and tried to move her fingers, unsure of the movements, self-conscious under his gaze. He was moving, she realised with mortification, stepping from behind her, to face her, and she avoided his dark look of intent.

“I told you to touch yourself” he repeated, his voice patient but firm. She brushed her nipples, feeling them stiffen with the motion, and tried to knead the flesh like Ben had, but felt nothing but embarrassment as a result.

“I don’t know how” she admitted, her voice a little strangled.

“It’s your body Rey, do what feels good” he said, and she snapped her eyes up to his, feeling her cheeks reddening under his gaze. He was still detached, far away and held back from her. She dropped her hands suddenly to her sides, and saw darkness surge in his eyes, his jaw clenching.

“I can’t”

“I didn’t tell you to stop” he growled.

“I don’t care” she said back, crossing her arms over her chest, refusing to look away from his challenging stare.
“I don’t need to remind you that you gave yourself over to me. You said you’d try” he said, a hint of the anger that had been brewing in him since he’d entered the room bleeding through.

“This is me trying” she shot back, and he let out a reluctant snort of disbelief at that. The incongruous sound lowered her guard, so she felt genuine surprise when he suddenly stepped toward her and grabbed her, one hand at her throat, the other at her back, pulling her against him. It didn’t hurt, but the sudden power of his movement took her breath away. He kissed her hard, his lips against hers, his tongue insistent and stubble scraping. She pushed away even as another part of herself reached for it.

“What do you feel right now?” he asked, breathing heavily when he pulled her face away, now clasped hard between his hands.

“Tell me Rey – be honest” he said, and it was the genuine appeal in his voice that reached her.

“Angry. Angry at you and… powerless and something else…”

“What else?” he pressed.

“Want. I want you to – I don’t know… I don’t even know what” she ground out, feeling shame and humiliation spreading through her.

“Well, let’s remedy one of those” he practically snarled as he lunged in to kiss her again, even while letting go of her, and she turned away, barely missing the hand that came up to grab her. She twisted under his arm and distanced herself, her heart pounding as she looked at him, full of anger and dark emotion, so far from the man she had wanted to find when she had agreed to all this.

They watched each other a long moment, before he lunged in again, going for her waist, and she dodged him, landing an elbow to the side of his head. It barely slowed him down as he recovered with impossible speed and grabbed her wrist, his hand lashing out as quick as a snake, and hauled her to him, twisting her around as she went, so she was once again held against his chest, and trapped her arms by her sides. She pushed and kicked at him, and elicited a ragged breath as she bucked her hips backwards against him, grinding for a moment against the hardness there, his desire for her. She realised with mortification that the fight was making her warm and wet, her whole body lighting up, so every touch was an explosion of sensation against her skin. He made it worse by igniting small fires wherever he touched, dragging rough palms against her breasts, pulling her hips against his in an indecent rhythm, while sliding the other hand around her chin, cupping her mouth and silencing her with a ragged grunt, while she sucked one of his fingers into her mouth and bit down on it.

He let her go with a growl, and she spun to face him, her cheeks flushed with exertion and desire, frustration and anger. She looked at him, and saw the very same emotion mirrored on Ben’s face, and it was Ben’s face, she realised. Somewhere in the tussle, that hated cold mask had melted away, and it was Ben looking at her. His eyes slowly drifted down, leaving hers and alighted on her chest, still bare, exposed for his eyes, and the injustice suddenly seemed too much to her.

He advanced on her again, this time catching her around the waist and lifting her off the ground. She thrashed in his grip, kicking wildly and landing a hard stab somewhere near his ribs, sending
his breath whooshing out. He went to his knees, taking her with him, and suddenly he was pinning her down, leaning over her, staring at her with hungry intensity.

“Submit to me Rey, just give in”

She bucked her hips again, and this time, threw a leg up and over his arms, breaking the lock his hands held on her wrists. She twisted away, but he was still in between her legs, his face trapped at the apex of her thighs, and she felt his hands pulling away her leggings, and then his face was burying itself there. His skin hot and urgent, she cried out at the onslaught of feeling, right where she felt empty and full of need.

“Ben-“ she breathed, unable to help herself. His mouth had found her by now, and he was setting an uncompromising rhythm against her, making her tense up like a bow string, unable to move her legs properly, still trapped at the ankles by her tight leggings, unable to move.

“Tell me what you want, Rey” he said, his voice muffled by her flesh. She gasped as she felt a long, blunt finger gently burrow through her folds, and slip inside her. She cried out.

“Tell me what you want me to do to you – and you’ll have it” he growled, removing the finger just as she felt that indescribably building sensation inside her, reaching for something that moved away as she touched it. She grabbed his head, pulling his hair roughly in retaliation.

“Submit to me, Rey – and I’ll give you everything” he said, his dark eyes flashing into hers, and she could have cried at the loss of his mouth.

“Never” she panted back and twisted away, still so angry, but now so full of need and yearning, but still unwilling to let him win. She crawled from his grasp, only a few meters before he grabbed her ankle and pulled the rest of her leggings off.

“Damn it” she swore, and kicked backward with her foot wildly. Her foot landed, and she felt the reverberation up her leg. She stopped, and after a long silent moment, scrambled around into a kneeling position.

“Oh my god, are you ok-“ she bit off as she saw he was already standing over her, stripping off his ruined shirt, with a ruthless efficiency, and then continuing to his trousers, followed swiftly by underwear, until he was standing completely naked above her. He looked painfully hard and erect, straining up from the nest of dark curls, his chest rising and falling rapidly, and his eyes trained on her with an absolute possession she found compelling. It was intoxicating, to be wanted with that intensity, to make someone burn. To make him burn.

He stepped toward her, and she felt alarm and arousal power her trembling limbs.

“What are you doing?” she cried.

“Taking what’s mine” he replied, an excited glint to his eye as he stalked toward her. She thought about trying to kick his legs out, or get up and run away. She thought about telling him, without the little smile that she couldn’t seem to shake, that she wasn’t enjoying their game. She thought about telling him he was scaring her, but she didn’t. She watched him come.

In the end, when he reached her, and bent sharply down, picking her up, hefting her weight as though it was nothing, she found she couldn’t lie. She didn’t do any of those things.

Instead, she let him turn her, pulling her sharply back onto all fours. Her head fell forwards as she felt him shift behind her, his fingers, circling, probing, moving in and out, his hot breath once more scorching the delicate skin of her inner thighs, until her legs were trembling and holding herself up
was an effort. Then, he was positioning himself over her, and tugging her chin back and up, to bring his lips into contact with his.

She bit down on his lips, and his gasp coincided with his slowly sliding inside her. Inch by inch, he was careful, but even she could feel how ready she was for this, for him.

She gasped at the full feeling, and she pushed back on her knees as he slowly started to move. Waiting for her to relax, for her to melt into him, he kept the pace gentle, until he finally slipped all the way in, and then, his hands were going to her shoulders and pulling her back against him, harder and harder. Each time their flesh met, Rey gasped, small, throaty groans of pleasure she couldn’t contain.

When she didn’t think her pleasure could mount anymore, she heard his voice growling in her ear.

“Touch yourself, Rey”

“What? Why?”

“Because, I am telling you to” he growled, and grabbed one of her hands, holding her up with the other hand splayed between her breasts. He pushed her hand to that sensitive bundle of nerves, the one that made her toes curl, and moved her fingers in a relentless circle.

Once her hand was moving of it’s own accord, he brought both hands back to her hips, and pushed her lower, changing the angle of his thrusts, hitting something deep and wondrous inside her. She could help the rough cry it pulled from deep inside her, Ben echoing the sound with his own moan.

“Tell me you want this, tell me you want us… want me” he said, his words coming out on each gasp. He suddenly pulled her, his hand tangled in her hair, until her back met his chest, his hands clamping down on her breasts, holding her up, holding her to him, until their flesh merged into one, as he continued his ruthless rhythm, and he urged her hand on and on.

“Say it, Rey” he bit out.

She bit down the little flare of assertiveness she felt at being told, the little voice that rebelled, and she realised how much his demands where adding to the climbing feeling inside her. She liked it, she realised. She liked Ben being high handed in this, ordering her to touch herself, ripping her shirt off, possessing her, consuming her. All his manners and careful control stripped away by the raw and urgent need to have her, to press their broken hearts into one.

“I want it.. I want you. All of you, every bit” she admitted, her voice almost strangled by the intensity of emotion and feeling.

The indecency of that realisation, that she liked to be conquered by him, sent her over the edge. A blinding jump into oblivion, with only Ben’s arms, wrapped around her middle to anchor her, his heart beating against hers, her name a prayer on his lips, spilling out again and again.

Chapter End Notes

Double update, for being so patient with me))

Can anyone suggest better tags for this story? I'm not good at tagging and I feel like mine aren't right.... feedback please!
What do you think! I love to hear your thoughts xx
“Ben? Let’s go to bed” Rey said, what felt like hours later, but was probably only minutes. She was lying against his chest, feeling the slow swell of his breath under her ear, like a yawning and empty ocean. He rumbled, deeply inside, and pulled her closer, his arms banded around her securely. She traced her fingers over his nipple, just within her eye line without raising her head, and his breath hitched.

“Just a little longer” he murmured into her hair.

“Are you ok?” she asked after a moment, sure the storm had passed, but desperate to know what had caused it.

“Are you?” he deferred masterfully.

“I’m not made of glass… and you’re avoiding the question.” She said, mustering the energy to raise her head from his chest and look down at him. His eyes opened to slits, hiding his emotion from her for a moment.

“I will be… now you’re with me” he said quietly. She reached out a finger and traced his full lips.

“About tomorrow –“ she started. He sighed with exhaustion and dropped his head back down with a thump.

“Are you going to be ok?” she asked, suddenly afraid of what emotions, guilt, love, loss, that might be stirred up by meeting his mother. She wanted him to face his fears and have a relationship with Leia Organa, but she was realising more and more, that it was no easy thing, to confront such volatile and painful emotions. She worried she was rushing him, someone who had never been free to do things on his own terms.

“I will be… if you’re with me” he repeated, surprising her. She looked up and caught a crooked smile, small and inconsequential, except that it wasn’t. It was everything.

“Just try and keep me away” she said fiercely, and he laughed, a genuine sound that Rey wished she could keep and replay over and over.

“I wouldn’t dare. You’re a force to be reckoned with”

“And don’t you forget it. Now take me to bed. Our bed. Now” she said, punctuating each word with a light slap to his chest, until he sat, pulling her up with him as he went.

“As you wish, princess”
Rey stared at the clothes in her wardrobe for what felt like the hundredth time, deeming everything too short, too tight, too sporty, too young. She’d never met Ben’s mother, though the woman had certainly taken on mythical proportions in her mind. She tentatively pulled out the outfit she’d worn to the interview at First Order, and chewed her lip critically.

Ben didn’t seem to be suffering from the same sartorial issues as she was, already dressed in a dark navy suit, with a white shirt underneath, and now staring at her hungrily as she hesitated in front of the wardrobe, bundled in his thick robe, the cuffs folded back, and belt clenched over the swath of fabric. His eyes were locked in a silent perusal, and she gave him a pointed look at the large clock on the wall.

“Don’t even think about it” she warned and he looked away at length, a hint of amusement touching his otherwise solemn face. He was nervous, she could read it in every line of his body and every pained deep breath.

“I have something for you actually.” He said suddenly, and she turned to see him opening his side of the wardrobe, and rummaging near the back. He pulled out a long, rectangular box, and set it on the bed, avoiding her eye a little. She knelt beside the mystery box and eased it open, her breath catching at the dress inside.

“When did you get this?” she asked, staring at the floral pattern, different but familiar.

“Years ago” he admitted, lifting the flowing chiffon out of the box, tissue falling to the side as he passed it to her.

“Why?” she asked, seeing his cheeks flush infinitesimally.

“It reminded me of you” he said, as she took the dress and held it up in front of herself in the mirror. It was the dress she’d worn to his graduation, but older, more sophisticated. A dress for a woman, but still, so reminiscent.

“Do you remember?” he asked, she could see him watching her reflection as she felt the beautiful weight of the dress, the chiffon overlay concealing soft silk over skirts.

“Of course, I remember… I hope it fits.” She said, biting her lip.

“There must be a story behind this, I don’t really see you window shopping the woman’s section” He nodded his agreement of her assumption, returning to his ties, to stare at them with a frown.

“You’d be right. It was an ex I dated, she liked to shop, and she bought that dress. She wore it once to dinner, and —” he broke off, staring into space and the memory for a moment. Rey waited as the silence stretched on.
“And then what?”

“I told her to take it off, and I forbid her from wearing it again. It ended soon after and she just forgot to return it, I suppose. Or maybe she thought it’d be fun to leave me a reminder of her, I’m not sure”

And he had kept it, because it reminded him of her, years after he’d last seen her, and years before he’d see her again. Rey swallowed hard and turned to her dresser to hunt for some underwear to put under.

“Ok, that’s a terrible story and you’re ruining my Pretty Woman moment” she called, as she disappeared into the bathroom with the dress and underwear. Her underwear was functional at best, but the dress was modest and hid everything well. It had capped sleeves and was tea length, and when she turned, the top layer floated a little. It was the same colours as her cheap graduation day one, white and lavender with broderie anglaise edging, a full skirt and nipped in waist, high necked bodice.

She couldn’t reach the zip at the back, so settled for sweeping her hair into a low bun and putting some make up on. Her routine hadn’t changed much since her teenage years, blusher, lipstick and mascara.

She stepped out to find Ben finishing adjusting a severe black tie in the mirror, his eyes shooting straight to her as she emerged. He watched her a whole minute, unmoving in the mirror, his eyes sweeping up and down the dress, her face, everything. He raised a hand in front of him and clicked an imaginary shutter, and Rey’s heart stopped.

“Rey comes home” he said quietly, turning around.

“You did not just do that” she said, unable to stop the smile spreading across her face.

“I really did” he murmured as he turned and approached her, gently cupping her face and pressing a chaste kiss to her lips, as his eyes continued their dedicated study of her features.

“I don’t suppose you’d let me give you jewellery” he said, tracing her naked ear lobes.

“That depends, if you asked me, probably not. If you commanded me…” she bit her lip and looked innocently up at him, enjoying this playful Ben.

“I thought you didn’t like being commanded” he reminded her, and she flashed back to last night and the delicious heat of surrendering her will to his, allowing him to win, giving him power over her, and her absolute trust.

“Well, you know… jewellery” she said with a wicked grin, before turning and presenting him her back.

“Zip me up, and then we need to go” she said, feeling eyes on the slice of her naked back, peeping through the unzipped sides of her dress. There was a long pause, one that suddenly felt loaded with his intent and want. She waited, and felt his warm fingers trace a single line down her spine.

“How late would we be?” he asked, his lower than before, and it sent a flush of heat creeping over her skin.

“Too late” she said, her own voice changed by the wave of desire she felt, always there, underlying everything, fanning brightly into a furnace at times.
“Shame” he breathed, and then the zip was moving up, and he pressed a short kiss to her nape.

Leia Organa Solo had not moved house in the years after her husband’s death, or the estrangement of her son. In fact, it was the very same house Ben had grown up in. Well, some of the time, he reminded himself, remembering the revolving carousel of disposable residences that they had cycled through year after year, abroad and in the States. This one had stuck, it seemed, and he looked at the familiar brownstone with trepidation, as he held the door open for Rey from the taxi they’d taken.

She stepped out lightly, swinging her legs gracefully out of the low step, stealing his nerves for a moment as she straightened up, her hand still in his, that dress, her dress, settling into place. She was all tanned limbs and sunlight, and her smile at him made him feel ten feet tall. She was fearless, and he could hardly fail to try and show a fraction of the ferocity that came so naturally to her. He lingered by the curb, her hand still held tightly in his. She took a step in the direction of the elegant building, and looked back as he failed to move, his eyes routed again to the door, frozen in the steps of his younger self.

“Ben, you are you ready?” she asked.

“No” he admitted freely, and felt her squeeze his hand.

“No” he admitted freely, and felt her squeeze his hand.

“Come on” she murmured, and tugged him along after her. His other hand was occupied with the flowers they had bought on the way, the heavy, bound bouquet twisting in his hand.

He felt as though time were slowing down, and speeding up all at once. He was climbing the stairs in slow motion, while Rey was bounding up, violently fast. The door was rushing toward him, while his heart beat had slowed to a crawl.

Rey reached out for the bell, one last squeeze of his hand, now a fist, wrapped in hers.

Almost before the bell had finished ringing, the door was opening, and time settled back into place. A decade spanned a heartbeat, and then, he was looking at the face of his mother. Once so deeply beloved, then so deeply avoided, until so desperately forgotten, impossible though that had proved to be.

She was so much older and frailer than he had imagined. Of course, he knew the dog-eared pictures of his mother in his mind, often folded and unfolded memories of a beautiful young woman, with dancing dark eyes, long, flowing dark hair and an intelligent smile, must be outdated, but he hadn’t expected the passage of time to have taken such a toll. She had always been small in
stature, and now, she barely reached the middle of his chest. Her hair, once a crowning glory, always bound up in intricate styles was thin, piled atop her head carefully, and he had the sudden impression that but for the painstaking pinning, he might be able to see her scalp. Her face was wrinkled, but familiar, so, heartbreakingly familiar, like a piece of him he hadn’t known was gone, suddenly slipping into place inside, and easing an ache he had grown so used to carrying, he had thought it merely a symptom of living. Her eyes were the same, though, a little more haunted, a little sadder, though now, as she looked up at him, her son, the stranger, a happiness and relief so bright bled through that it hurt Ben to look at it. He dropped that gaze, too much emotion shutting his throat, pinching his eyes.

“Ben” she said, her voice gravelly and low, as he always remembered. He felt the weight of both women’s stares of him, and shifted uncomfortably.

“Leia” he said, choosing to use her name and seeing her face fall at the sound of it felt like a reprimand.

He turned to Rey instead, relieved to shift the focus from himself.

“This is Rey, she’s –“

“I remember Rey, though we never did meet, to my regret” Leia said, taking Rey’s other hand and enveloping it in hers, a warm smile on her lips.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Mrs Organa-Solo” The name sounded awkward and Leia laughed as Rey got it out.

“Call me Leia, and that’s not a request. Come inside, you are most welcome” Leia said, turning from the threshold, her eyes skimming over Ben’s hand, clutching Rey’s like a lifeline.

Ben stepped over the threshold of the house he had been a boy in, feeling the ghosts crowd in. The Ming vase on the end table his father had almost broken once, playing airplane with him, the polished bannister where he had slid down and put a tooth through his lip. And then there were the photographs. They lined the walls, black and white, vivid colour. It was him, and Han, and Leia too. It was all of them, alone or together, a museum of childhood on the walls of that townhouse, a memorial to all that was lost.

He felt Rey linger, could practically feel her curiosity bristling off her, but she allowed herself to be led after Leia, and Ben gratefully moved from the hall and its reminders of smiles too long gone to remember, of a happiness, too innocent to have been real.

The small parlour was laid for tea, which was Leia’s favourite room. It was a room in the house for family, and not for receiving guests. He didn’t linger on the connotations.

He sat awkwardly, and Rey sat beside him, the couch different from before, and stared out the floor length windows of the wall opposite, the familiar sight of the garden a bitter nostalgia. It was all so similar, how had his mother lived here, in this tomb to the family that had he had torn apart, in the ruins he had left in his wake.

“Would you like tea?” Leia was asking Rey, who was nodding enthusiastically, shifting on the edge of her seat, her unbridled energy a shocking contrast to Leia’s fragility. Leia poured three cups, and Ben lost himself in the amber of the liquid, as Rey asked for milk and sugar. Leia left his black, which was his preference. He wondered if she remembered or if she was leaving him to make his own.
“So, Rey, please, tell me, what have you been up to since St Augustine’s?” Leia asked politely, but he could see his mother was genuinely interested in this girl that had come with her wayward son. The same one he had clung to all those years ago, now again by his side, and accompanying him to meet her. He felt a strange shifting in his chest as he watched Rey go through her university background and onto what she did now. It was something unidentifiable to begin with, and he was taken by Rey’s clear laugh and self-deprecation, her warm smile and animated hand gestures.

He caught sight of the same look on his mother’s face, and it made the feeling in his chest magnify ten-fold. He wanted his mother to like her, he realised suddenly, with startling clarity. He wanted Leia to love Rey, as he did, to appreciate her, to see the woman he had won for himself… to feel… proud of him. The thought shocked him. He had tried for long to distance himself from such emotions, and while he knew he’d never managed, where it pertained to Rey, it seemed it hadn’t taken particularly well in relation to the other important woman in his life either. Rey was a prize, a conquest above all others, she was the kind of women men fought wars over and poets immortalised and she was here, with him.

“That sounds like good work. There is only so much the city can afford to put on in each borough, and it falls woefully short most of the time. My foundation aims to help in these areas, through private fundraising” Leia was saying, and Rey was watching her with rapt attention.

“Has Ben ever talked about the work the Organa-Solo foundation does?” Leia continued.

“No, we haven’t – not yet” Rey trailed off lamely. Ben gripped his cup a little tighter, and took a long sip of hot tea.

“It’s a wonderful cause, and something I think you’d be interested in. We can always use young blood, new ideas and energy for our cause, I’d love to tell you more sometime”

“This is not a recruitment lunch I hope” Ben said tightly. Leia spared him a glance before turning back to Rey.

“Ben used to be quite involved until –“ she started, and stopped suddenly.

*He killed his father*’ Ben finished her sentence in his head and put his cup down in the saucer, glancing over and seeing Rey frozen on the edge of her seat, her brow creased, looking between them.

“Finish your tea” he said reflexively, trying to claw back the atmosphere. She immediately raised her cup to her mouth, her eyes still darting back and forth, before setting down her cup and smiling at Leia.

“You have a lovely home” she said brightly, gesturing at the elegant parlour, in hand painted paper, punctuated by art and antiques.

“Thank you, it’s been in our family a long time. It’s the longest home I’ve had. Ben grew up in this house, well, from infancy to school age, I suppose.” Leia said, flashing a look at him that made him tense. There was such longing there, longing for him to join in her memories, reminisce with her. It made the shuttered, claustrophobic feeling worse. He gripped the chair hard, and felt Rey’s fingers ghost over the back of his hand for a moment.

“I would offer you a tour-“ Leia continued, and Rey jumped to her feet, surprising them both.

“I’d love that” she said. Leia rose slower, chuckling.

“Such enthusiasm, I don’t think I’ve met someone with this much energy in a good long while.
Jack said you were a powerhouse. Ben, will you be joining us?” She asked, pausing on the cusp of the doorway.

“I believe I’ll finish my tea” he said shortly, knowing Rey was trying to give him a little space and grateful for it. He avoided his mother's gaze, unwilling to see yet more disappointment there already.

“The inconvenient child who ruined his parents lives and stole their freedom, sealed them together in never ending warfare”.

Snoke’s voice in his head, his words repeated so often they had become a chant that played on repeat whenever he thought about Leia.

“The awkward and charmless burden they had broken under”

The door finally closed, and he sank back in the soft, forgiving couch, relaxing his rigid posture. There was a fire lit, and he stared into the flames, trying to bring his spiralling emotions under control.

Rey followed Leia up winding stairs, plushly carpeted, with stunning floral displays dotted evenly on the way. They climbed to the second floor to begin their tour, walking down a long corridor, with yet more pictures of a young Ben.

Rey stopped in front of one, her curiosity back with a burning fury now that Ben was safely downstairs. He was sitting before a piano, with a playful scowl on his face, hamming it up for the camera, and couldn’t have been more than 7 or 8 years old.

“He hated it from day one.” Leia said, turning back and seeing Rey lingering. She came to her side and stared at the black and white print.

“He wanted to do karate lessons, but I thought maybe he’d enjoy being able to play when he was older” Leia mused, and Rey watched her.

“He doesn’t play, if you’re wondering. He gave up after four or five lessons. He would put up a big fuss, and then come and wrap those long arms around me, legs too, if he could manage it, and press his face into my back. Well, I never had the heart to make him after that. I never was good at making Ben do anything he didn’t want to” Leia finished before angling a look at Rey.

“Though, you seem to have figured that one out… though, something tells me it is a power exclusive to you” she said, and startled Rey by reaching out and touching her arm lightly.

“Thank you, Rey. Thank you for coming to see me, and bringing my son with you” she said, her
warm eyes crinkling at the corners.

“It wasn’t – he didn’t –“ Rey broke off, flustered, and realised it was pointless trying to lie to Ben’s mother. She smiled faintly.

“Thank you for seeing us” she said. Leia regarded her moment longer, before turning and starting along the corridor once more.

“Jack told you, I presume, about the cancer”

“Yes, he did. I’m so sorry” Rey said, following in her wake.

“I know, you’re a kind girl”

“If there is anything I can do” Rey offered, unsure what to say, how to sympathise and not irritate.

“You are already doing it. Call on me again, bring Ben, it’s more than enough. Its more than I deserve” Rey stopped at that, her heartbeat suddenly clanging in her head. Leia glanced back over her shoulder and motioned Rey on.

“Come one now, let’s keep moving, and let’s not pretend that we don’t both know to whom I am referring” Rey suddenly realised the iron like strength of the woman beside her. A woman who had lost it all, who must feel responsible and guilty everyday of her life, and yet continued on, fought to do what she could for other children, in memory of the one she had lost, a woman who knew no other way than to fight.

“Snoke” Rey said tentatively, and saw Leia’s hand clench into a fist at her side for a moment, her stride continuing unbroken.

“That evil, twisted –“ she broke off, her voice pained, and stopped still in the hallway, her head bowed. Rey approached her quietly, and softly laid a hand on her shoulder.

“How can he shake his demons when he won’t acknowledge them…” Leia asked suddenly, her hand gripping Rey’s. Rey shook her head sadly and Leia’s face fell.

“Has he told you? Has he talked about any of it…” Rey shook her head sadly and Leia’s face fell.

“How can he shake his demons when he won’t acknowledge them” she muttered, and Rey’s heart twisted at the guilt and sorrow she saw there.

“I think he is acknowledging them, because he’s here. I think it’s a start. His start, whether he realises it, or not” Rey said, and found that she believed it. Ben could hardly see his mother and avoid bringing it all up. Whether he realised it or not, he was trying to bring the past out into the light, or at least willing to begin to, for her. To have her.

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do, to have you” his whispered words that morning when they had forged a new world, one in which the past would no longer control them.

“I hope you’re right, for Ben’s sake… and yours too. Thought I can’t imagine it’s going to be easy. In fact, I think it might just hurt like hell” Leia said softly, and gave Rey a sympathetic smile and Rey knew, she meant for them both. She had a creeping feeling that Leia was right, but couldn’t think about that, she didn’t want to dwell on it. After a moment, as Rey let her determination show on her face, Ben’s mother straightened up and dashed away the errand tears that had collected in her cheeks, plastering a similar look of strength and resolve on her face. She gestured down the hall.

“Come, let me show you Ben’s first bedroom”
Ben said goodbye to his mother rather stiffly, but maybe a little less awkwardly than he had greeted her. Rey watched with trepidation as Leia leaned in for a kiss on the cheek, and she steeled herself to see Ben pull back and the look of disappointment on the older woman’s face. But Ben surprised her, letting Leia press her papery lips against his cheek, even bending to a massive degree to facilitate it, though his arms still hung limply at his side. Rey had embraced her warmly, trying to press her warmth into Leia’s tired looking bones.

Ben hailed a cab, and then reached for Rey’s hand, squeezing it tightly as they stood at the curb waiting for one to pull in, conscious of Leia’s eyes on them from the door. It finally came, and Rey climbed inside, rather exhausted from the whole afternoon, and Ben collapsed back next to her with similar weariness. The ride home was short and quiet, Ben barely spoke, settling for just pressing a kiss to her forehead and then staring out the window.

That evening, lying in bed, Rey read about interior design, while Ben read a book. She propped the pillows in the middle and turned to face him, just as they had always studied in high school. He was pensive, the visit to his mother’s weighing heavily on him, but there was also an air of relief to him. Maybe he’d always known he’d have to see her again, maybe he had always wanted to be forced to. Whatever he was feeling, he didn’t want to talk about it. Rey glanced up and found him watching her periodically, his eyes soft. She would smile back, and he would turn back to his book, his hand reaching out to pull her bare foot onto his lap, his strong fingers kneading circles into the muscles there.

There was an intimacy to the silence between them, something beautifully perfect about doing separate, unimportant things together, in perfect comfort and peace. They had slid into each other’s worlds again, and fit precisely, once more filling up the empty and aching places of the other. Rey felt her eyes droop, as the soft light of the lamp, and the warmth of the covers, Ben’s fingers sending pulses of relaxation up her legs, all got to her. She crawled up the bed and got into her side, hearing Ben shut their books and snap off the light, then he was shifting behind her and pulling her against him, warm and comforting at her back, and murmuring good night into her hair. She slept deeply as she hadn’t in years, the other part of her no longer lost in the wilds of the world, no longer a tiny part of her wondering where he was, if he was alright. He was finally here, and together, they were alone no more.

Chapter End Notes
Hey all!

In celebration of Mothers Day - well, UK Mother's Day... we have a chapter all about the original Warrior Princess Mother.

Super fluffy in parts, hope you enjoy, next one won't be! Not super deep into Ben and Leia's backstory, but more will be revealed as they try and work out what kind of relationship they can have going forward.

Featuring... "I got you a fancy dress" trope! With a little Ben like twist)) Hope you enjoyed it.

p.s couldn't resist Ben calling Rey princess... can't quite decide what Kylo Ren from the movies would call Rey, if he were to loosen the hell up and learn to flirt... but it seems like maybe he'd take a leaf from his father's play book... as in the only example he's ever had of loving banter.

Comment and kudos for a double update.... you know you want to!
“Gracing us with your presence, what an honour” Snoke voice was dripping with distain and malice as he watched Ben walk into the room plastered in screens, a carefully blank look on his face.

“Helping Rey to adjust to the new arrangement has proved time consuming” Ben said shortly, knowing it was pointless to try and lie to him. Snoke shot him a calculating look.

“So, you have managed to manoeuvre the girl into the position you desire, if you will. And how has she responded? The little feral thing…”

“She is adapting” Ben said.

“Quickly, I hope, for you cannot allow her to monopolise your attention any longer, things here require your presence. I require your presence, and I do not like to be kept waiting” Snoke said. He suddenly pushed his frail body upwards, standing before Ben, and reached out one, bony hand to hover over his chest. Ben froze, thinking for one excruciating moment that his teacher was about to touch him, and sure he wouldn’t be able to stand it.

“If absence makes the heart grow fonder, does that mean you desire me to be fonder of you, Ben.” His mentor murmured, and all the hair on Ben’s body stood up. He thought for a moment he might embarrass himself by retching on the floor, right there, on Snoke’s shoes. He bit back his nausea, that guttural reaction that the man was able to draw from him.

He couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe, and felt fear and loathing spiralling through him. Snoke let him writhe in his horror long moments, until his laboured breathing was the only sound in the room.

“I know what ails you, my son, and I have the fix. This is what your project, your little diversion, your Rey, doesn’t understand yet, I will always know your heart, and how to mend your torn soul. I am the only one who does, and who ever will… am I not?” Snoke said, and Ben heard his voice spilt into two strands, at once a threat and plea.

“As you say, Professor” Ben muttered, his head swimming with disgust and fear, loathing and desperation. Snoke was focusing on Rey, he was feeling threatened, and Snoke in a corner was a dangerous thing.

His master lowered his hands to his belt, and Ben watched without emotion as the old man undid his belt, and drew the scarred leather through the belt loops slowly, his eyes blazing and feverish.

“What do you think a reasonable number? To cleanse your soul and refocus your mind?” Snoke pressed, holding the belt out to Ben, as Ben sank onto his knees, already more than familiar with
the routine.

“I would take your guidance, Professor” Ben said, lowering his eyes from the man standing above him, and deftly unbuttoning his shirt, button by button, stripping it off and feeling Snoke’s eyes on his body like a brand.

“Very well. I will stop you when it’s time. Count for me, Ben.” He instructed darkly, and Ben let his voice fade as his arm brought the belt over his shoulder in a practice motion. The pain, the only thing to focus on, gave him a refuge from the terrifying thoughts clouding his mind. If Snoke found out the truth about Rey, their relationship, his feelings for her, his weakness… he would never allow her to remain in his life. He might threaten her, and that was something Ben could not allow. He released it in a flash of clarity, that he couldn’t let anything jeopardise his relationship with Rey. It was time to let old things die, he reminded himself, and for the first time, he knew where to start.

Rey pushed through the heavy doors of the restaurant and walked quickly through the crowded tables, aiming for the dark head of hair sitting taller than everyone else. She slipped into the seat quickly, while Ben was still looking down at his phone in his hand, and shrugged her coat off.

“I’m late” she said as he looked up at her, setting his phone to the side.

“Yes, you are” he agreed, pouring her a glass of wine from the bottle on the table in front of them. She could see his shoulders were high and tense, his dark gaze looked preoccupied.

“I trust the interview went well” he asked and Rey frowned.

“Not as well as it could have. Turns out it’s hard to get a corporate bid if the owner of the company isn’t secretly stalking you” she said, and Ben snorted a laugh through a mouthful of wine at her words, loud and uncouth, and totally unlike him. She grinned at him.

“Thanks for that” he said shortly, wiping his mouth on his napkin, and settling back, looking more relaxed than before.

“You’re very welcome” she said agreeably, picking up the menu and staring at the list of food, before raising narrowed eyes to his.

“This isn’t in English” she accused. He nodded mildly.

“Good catch, it’s in Italian” he said, frowning as his phone vibrated on the table.

“What do you feel like eating” he asked, picking up the menu again, as she discarded it to
concentrate on her wine.

“I don’t know… can you just choose for me?” she said, waving her hand dismissively. His tiny thrill at her accept of his choice for her, stroked his ego. He was so out of his depth with his feelings for her, even just a tiny indication that she was getting used to him being in her life made him soar.

“As you wish” he said, turning to the waiter and ordering without the menu. They spoke back and forth in Italian for a moment, before the man headed off toward the kitchen.

“Was that even on the menu?”

“Not tonight, but I’m sure they can manage. You’ll love it” he said, with all the confidence of someone used to being able to pay for whatever he wanted in life.

“The kitchen staff must hate you”

“Most people do” he said, without so much as a shrug.

“Does it bother you?” he asked suddenly. She thought about it a moment.

“I thought you didn’t care what people think?” she said.

“I don’t particularly, but I would care, if it upset you”

“I don’t care what people think, either. Just my friends, Jack…”

“That’s it?” he asked at length as she turned her attention to the wine glass, playing with the stem.

“That’s it.” She confirmed, and he watched her long moment, her eyes challenging him to smile, daring him to come and play with her, abandon his bad mood.

“Well, maybe one more person” she finally said, and was rewarded with the smallest quirk of a lip, hardly anything, but better than nothing.

“On the topic of friends, it’s Finn birthday party at the weekend. It’s out in Brooklyn. I’ll probably just stay at Jacks” she said, and watched him turn the words over in his mind.

“I would rather you came home” he said after a moment.

“Really, I’m shocked” she murmured teasingly, and earned a dark look in return.

“It’s only for the night, and I need to see them, I’ve been ignoring everyone, and it’s not nice” she said matter-of-factly.

“Anyway, I thought you wouldn’t approve of me taking a taxi all alone, late at night”

“I would organise a car for you” Rey rolled her eyes and shook her head vigorously.

“No way” she maintained. His hand flexed on his glass, but otherwise he was steady.

“You might be the least biddable person I’ve ever met” he mused length, taking a sip of his wine, the moment of tension passing.

“Oh please, you love it” she murmured.
“The real question is, how are you going to make it up to me?” he asked.

“How about sex on your desk at work?” she said suddenly, and he gaped a little at her, and she felt a moment of triumph, making him lose his composure.

“I spoke to Jessika before, she was thinking, that since we are… erm, involved now, and the mysterious tension has passed, if we might be able to finish our First Order bid. If you haven’t employed anyone else yet” Rey said, sitting back as the waiter arrived with two steaming plates of food. She looked hungrily at the dish being set in front of her. Pasta with curling black shavings on top.

“It’s black truffle” Ben said as she carefully rolled a mouthful of spaghetti and popped it in her mouth. She chewed slowly, and her eyes threatened to roll back as the flavour hit her, earthy and musky and rich.

“Well?” he said, smiling now at her reaction.

“Well done. I’ll let you choose for me again”

“High approval indeed” Ben smirked. He fell silent as they ate, and Rey wondered if he was going over her proposal to work at First Order.

“I can’t deny the idea of having you at work – and, make no mistake about the various ways of having you, I am imagining.” He said, flashing her a wicked look from those dark eyes.

“But, there does seem likely to be a lot more projects out there that wouldn’t suffer the same… scrutiny” he finished. So, he wasn’t going to directly talk about the big, festering spider, crouching in the corner of the conversation.

“Projects that we can’t get if we don’t get some experience” Rey said in return. Ben was quiet, working on his risotto.

“I thought you told me Snoke wasn’t really a problem” Rey said suddenly, bringing the careful, unspoken agreement to avoid the topic to an end. Ben shifted in his seat, suddenly too interested in chasing stray grains of gelatinous rice around the plate.

“It’s complicated. I don’t want to talk about it” he said, clearly uncomfortable, and Rey considered how hard to push. One of the main reasons she had taken Jessika’s tentative suggestion was to get back into First Order, and see more of Snoke, see what Ben was dealing with, and how she could start to pry them apart.

“Which one is it? It’s complicated, or you don’t want to talk about it?” she asked, treading on the side of mild, hoping she could draw Ben into admitting his nebulous feelings.

“Both” he said finally, shifting back and setting down his fork, reaching for his drink. Slowly he raised his eyes to hers.

“I didn’t realise we were going to keep our complicated relationships from each other… does it apply to me to?” she said innocently, grabbing a piece of crusty bread to mop up any left-over oil.

“Who do you have complicated relationships with?” he asked at once, as she knew he would. She shrugged.

“It’s too complicated. I don’t want to talk about it.” she said sweetly, popping the bread in her mouth. They stared at each other. Ben opened his mouth to say something, and then, the words
seemed to die on his lips. He dropped her gaze and looked over her shoulder at the waiter, motioning for the bill.

“Let’s go” he said distractedly, and Rey nodded simply, grabbing her coat and downing the rest of her glass of wine.

"I'm going to take a shower" Ben called as they arrived back at the apartment. He headed through to the bedroom, and shut the door, while Rey took off her shoes and jacket, and went to the island in the kitchen. He was withdrawing from her, she hated it, but at the same time could recognise the need. She poured herself a glass of water, and went to her favourite spot by the window, looking out over the park, a dark rectangle, surrounded by twinkling golden and neon lights of the buildings framing it.

She heard the shower turn on, and the bathroom door closed quietly next door.

Getting Ben to talk about Snoke was dangerous. He was always so guarded, so alert for any attempts, even from her. She longed to rage at him and plead with him, never to see the monster again, to cut him out his life, and never look back. She thought about issuing an ultimatum, but genuinely wasn’t sure what the result would be. How deeply the hooks of Snoke’s manipulation were buried in Ben, she didn’t know, couldn’t even begin to imagine. He might very easily be able to persuade Ben that if she loved him, she wouldn’t make him choose, if she loved him, she would endure anything to be with him. She wondered if Snoke knew how Ben’s walls were already crumbling under her touch, her presence in his life. She could see it, more and more every day, how difficult it was for Ben to don the mask of Kylo Ren, she could see more and more of the man she knew he had buried under the callous, remote and hard demeanour of his alter ego. She had thought her task was to destroy Kylo Ren, and liberate Ben, so he could make the changes he needed to. But now, she was beginning to realise that perhaps destroying Kylo Ren was only the beginning, the person Ben had thought up who was stronger than him, felt less, could function more. Without him, Ben would have to work to become the man he had never had to be, the one who could face his awful past head on, and let it go.

She sighed despondently and turned for the bedroom. Nothing was going to be resolved overnight, that much was clear, she thought as she started to tidy up their room. She thought woefully of the sexy matching lingerie that she had put under her interview approved skirt and top, one of her only matching sets. Talking about Snoke had certainly killed any amorous feelings either of them had been building toward this evening.

Ben had left his things on the chair by his bed, and as she passed by, she caught a strange smell, harsh and medicinal. She stopped, and glanced either way, before her eyes homed in on his
discarded shirt. She picked it up, and opened it out. The smell was stronger now, definitely coming from the item. She saw a strange, clear liquid, shot through with pink veins on the inside of his shirt. She sniffed it, and there it was, the herbal, astringent smell, and something else too, musky and tangy, unpleasant, she thought wrinkling her nose.

She sat on the edge of the bed with the shirt in her hands, a horrible suspicion forming as she waited for Ben’s shower to end.

She had felt his back, briefly, she knew there was some kind of old scar there, but she’d never seen it. Now that she really thought about it, she had never really seen him shirtless from the back, certainly not during sex, and not even incidentally while changing. Ben was often already dressed when she got out of bed in the morning, or changed while she was out the room at night.

She heard the shower go off, and waited.

A few moments later, Ben emerged, his hair wet and falling in damp curls, his face a tad more relaxed, though that look soon became guarded as he saw her sitting with his shirt in her hands. A towel hung low on his hips, and another around his shoulders, black, like everything he owned.

“Rey?” he asked, stopping on the threshold of the bathroom. She stared at him, waiting. He came hesitantly into the room.

“What is it?” he asked, and she could tell it was a struggle to sound nonchalant.

“She showed me” she said simply, and waited again.

“Show you what?” he said, and they locked stares, a battle of wills, where he begged her not to push, and she relentlessly wore him down.

“Show me, Ben.” She said again, her voice softer this time, and stood suddenly. A shot of nerves and something else, something fleeting and painful to observe flittered across his features. Shame.

He let out a long breath.

“Fine” he muttered, and sat on the edge of the bed, just when she’d thought he was about to refuse again. He pulled the towel off his shoulders and cast it aside, and then braced his elbows on his knees, staring off toward the darkness outside the window. Rey moved around the side of the bed and lowered her eyes to his back, afraid of what she would find there.

Only the grounding feeling of her nails were cutting into her palms, stopped the cry of pain from bursting from her lips. She stared at his back, made herself look, squeezing her hands into fists so hard that they shook.

The smooth, broad muscles of his back jumped under her gaze, as he seemed to resist turning to see her expression. He held still and merely bore her scrutiny.

His skin was pale, the same constellations of moles decorating the sculpted shape, of broad shoulders, down to his strong waist, he was a study of strength and masculinity and suffering. The cuts were mostly across the middle of the shoulder blades, with some lapping over his spine. She could see old scars, ridged and silvery in the soft bedside light. Some were little knots of scar tissue, others, long straight lines, souvenirs of different kinds of pain. And some looked so old, Rey couldn’t think about how old Ben was when he had received them, as to do so would be to break down in front of him, and she couldn’t do that. She wouldn’t do that.

The fresh ones were an odd shape, some straight, some bunched, deeper in points and shallow at others. They were bleeding a little from the shower, and look angry and painful. When had he
gotten them? Why? Was it because of her? All these thoughts flooded through her as she looked at
him, feeling her heart break more and more every second he sat stone still under her gaze, braced
for her judgement. The man she was living with, sleeping with and dreaming off, was hurting
himself, and she didn’t know what to do with that. There was such darkness in this act, she quaked
at the evidence in front of her.

“It doesn’t usually get infected. It looks worse than it feels” he said gruffly, and Rey pulled herself
back to Ben, to the man waiting with a bowed head and resigned air, and away from the tableau of
pain and sickness she saw in front of her, sure the image would haunt her.

“I suppose you really do think I’m a monster, now” he said with certainty, and she recoiled from
the words.

She wondered how to speak, couldn’t think of words, couldn’t imagine how to soothe him, how to
make him understand it didn’t change how she thought of him, not really, how it filled her veins
with fire and vengeance she longed to extract against the deserving target. Snoke.

None of that would help at this moment, she knew it instinctively. She thought about her own
experiences with pain and humiliation, though it had been a long, long time. She knew what would
have made her feel worse, as counter intuitive as it was. Just now Ben felt as though the darkest
and most shameful piece of him had been exposed and he waited for her verdict, for her to find him
disgusting and pitiful. But she didn’t, she couldn’t.

“Big whoop, Solo, we all have scars” she said lightly, though the effort of it cost her. His shoulders
tensed at the sound of her voice, before slowly sinking down. He glanced sideways at her, his eyes
wary.

“What?”

“I said we all have scars, don’t be a baby about it” she said, gritting her teeth at the words.

He twisted around to look at her properly, jolted by her challenging tone from that dark place her
seeing the scars had taken him to.

“I know what you’re doing” he warned quietly, cautiously, testing the waters to see her resolve.

“Being a drama queen?” Rey asked, before pressing a kiss onto the top of his shoulder, an
unblemished spot.

“No… wait, that’s you” she finished, following up her kiss with a light slap.

She jumped off the bed and went to stand in front of him, just out of reach and unbuttoned her shirt,
letting it fall down to her wrists, meeting his eyes at every turn, refusing to let him see the sadness
inside. She twisted around and pointed to a tiny scar on her ribcage.

“White water rafting, Junior year” she said, and placed her hands on her hips, daring him to take
her on. He stared up at her, standing in front of him in only her bra, daring him to abandon his
shame and suspicion. His eyes were still heavy, still full of pain, so she tried again.

She held her finger out, just before his face.

“Thanksgiving dinner, Jack had me cutting the sweet potatoes, and those buggers are slippery” she
announced, proudly displaying the paper fine, white scar along one finger.

He let out a reluctant laugh at her antics finally, and something inside her relaxed infinitesimally.
He stood slowly in front of her, bringing him close to her, and there was something charged about the deliberate way his eyes dragged up her.

He twisted around, and she had to lower her eyes to avoid the mass of scars over the shoulders, to prevent herself from storming into Snoke’s office and driving her staff between his eyes until his skull caved in.

“Freshman year” he said, revealing an old burn, the skin smooth but distorted and shiny, on his hip. Rey didn’t fail to notice that he didn’t say how. He turned back and she could feel his desire, he wanted to touch her, and it made her heart beat hard.

Holding his gaze, she slipped her skirt down over her thighs and came to the edge of the bed, turning and leaning over the bed, with her arms braced, she revealed a long scar running around the curve of her cheek, tapering into her inner thigh.

“Rock climbing… fell on my ass on a real pointy one” she revealed, a little embarrassed by the position and the idiotic accident, but was rewarded with the guarded look dropping completely from Ben’s face as he moved to stand behind her, his hands closing on her hips.

“I wondered about this one… I felt it” he murmured, tracing the path around to the inner thigh, and the further.

“Oof” Rey left out a gasp as she felt his fingers gently tracing the outline of her opening, feather-light, through the silk of her underwear, as his other hand leisurely explored the smooth, rounded cheeks of her ass.

“Ben?”

“Show and tell time over. Hold still” he said, that now familiar bossy tone creeping into his voice, the one that her body had started to clench in reaction to.

“This is very interesting underwear” he said, snapping one side of the sheer, black lace panties, before pulling it aside.

“Thanks, it was a present” she murmured as his finger started to dip inside, and she arched her back a little, lifting her hips up. His finger stilled.

“From?” he demanded, and somehow the possessiveness in his voice only served to turn her on more, something she’d have to exam later when she could think clearly again.

She was tempted to tell him it was complicated, but she didn’t want to send him spiralling back to Snoke and his wounds.

“Rose… she was trying to help me… with a little problem I had”

“What kind of problem required lingerie to solve?”

“It didn’t solve it, it was useless” Rey said, pushing her hips back and forth to get him to start moving again.

“I see, and do you still suffer from this problem?” he asked, finally starting his finger again, a thrusting, twisting motion that make her gasp, his other hand reaching around the front of her, and gently circling her.

“God no. I found the perfect remedy, made for me, actually, just what I needed” she babbled,
finding it harder and harder to concentrate on words, and hearing by Ben’s ragged breath that he was feeling much the same.

“Which was?” His finger was moving at a furious pace now, and Rey felt her face flushing as pleasure soared through her.

“You, just you” she said, her voice strangled with desire at the whole thing. His strong body towering over hers, wholly concentrated on her pleasure, his fingers and voice, the way she was bent before him.

He growled deep in his throat at her words, and pulled his fingers carefully from her, as he pulled her upright, even as she gave a loud protest.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and gripped her hips, pulling her over him, so she hung above, and then, whipping his towel back, pulled her slowly onto him. She sank down the length of him, a grunt of pleasure and pain in her mouth, as she took in the view of Ben beneath her, his beautiful face taut with pleasure, his massive chest clutched under her greedy hands, abdominals flexing as he leaned away from her, strong thighs bracketing hers.

She started to move, inching up and down, getting used to him, while he watched her with rapt attention. His hands moved to her breasts, cupping and teasing, tugging her nipples to sharp peaks, before groaning loudly as she started to move more confidently.

He raised a hand to her hair, and another to her mouth, rubbing across her lips, and she tasted herself there, the shocking intimacy of the act making her tremble. He pulled her close to him, and set a demanding pace beneath her, every jolt sending her closer and closer to the hazy oblivion he was stoking inside her.

He swore after a moment, and tipped her back, and she gripped onto his arms at the sudden movement. He put his huge hands under her back and lowered her, so there was space between their chests and Rey was practically hanging off the bed, her weight completely held by Ben. The new position made her toes curl, and then, one strong arm curling under her back, Ben’s finger moved back to her front, circling her swollen flesh, dragging a ragged cry from her. He bent over her and swallowed the cry with his mouth, hungry for her, as he stole her breath, and pushed her closer and closer to the edge.

She muttered and cried his name, a chant without consciousness, before she felt herself fall over, tumbling into the feeling and taking him with her, warm and urgent inside her.

He kept pushing into her while she saw stars in his arms, his own seed already spent inside, drawing out her pleasure as long as possible, until she clutched his shoulders and pulled herself up, pressing her forehead to his, their laboured breaths mixing.

She wrapped her arms around him, and pressed her face into the nook between his neck and shoulder and pressed kisses into the soft skin there, as he slowly came back to her, his hands moving in slow, lazy circles on her bare back.

“Mmm” she breathed, and felt his chest rumble in response under her, in agreement.

“Ben?” she said after a moment, feeling her body start to cool, the cold of Ben’s wet hair brushing the tops of her shoulders.

“Rey” he said, and his voice was sated and calm. Peaceful almost.

“Go get the antibiotic cream, I’ll put it on for you” she ordered gently, and leaned away to see his
face. It was clear, only the memory of turbulence there now. He gave her crooked smile, and she knew the storm had passed, and they had weathered it together. He looked almost relieved, free of the burden, a sinner after confession, innocent and light after absolution.

“As you wish, princess”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry... double turned into normal update! But couldn’t get on the site and then got caught up with boring life stuff. In the list of endless tropes, kissing scars - with a twist (I hope!)

Anyway! Hope you enjoy!
“That’s what you’re wearing” Ben said, leaning on the doorframe, as Rey brushed her hair in the mirror, his arms crossed over his chest, an impassive expression on his face. She glanced at him in the mirror, nodded.

“Yes, it is.” She said, smoothing her hands over the hem of her top, and giving him a smile. He looked her up and down, and she felt her skin prickle in the wake of his hot gaze.

“Is that a problem?” she challenged, slipping her feet into one of her only pairs of heels.

“Little racy, isn’t it?” he remarked, and she grinned at is too studied nonchalance.

“It’s jeans and a t-shirt. And racy is not a word of your generation, grandad.” She teased, spritzing on perfume and heading for her leather jacket. She busied herself with taking her cards out her wallet and putting them into the zipper jacket pockets.

“Fine, it’s a little sexy then… for a night out without your boyfriend” he breathed in her ear, suddenly enveloping her in is long arms, pulling her back against his chest.

“It’s not sexy”

“I beg to differ”

“You just think everything I wear is sexy” she argued back, tilting her face up for a kiss, which he instantly obliged.

“Well, that is certainly true” he breathed, letting out a reluctant sigh as she wiggled out his embrace and shrugged her jacket on. For a finishing touch she grabbed a lipstick, her going out shade, as she thought of it, a deep blood crimson, and spread it carefully on, finally succeeding in making her casual outfit more birthday appropriate.

“Now you’re just being cruel” Ben murmured, watching her tuck the slim tube into another pocket and close it.

“You are sure you don’t want to just come home later? I would make it worth your while” he again, and flashed her a wicked smile. Rey turned and pulled him in to her, her hands grasping the lapels of his suit jacket, another workday despite it being Saturday.

“Why don’t you just do what other guys would do… enjoy the time alone. Or go out for a drink, see some friends”

“You’re my friends”
“Go to the movies… for a drink” he rolled his eyes, demonstrating his contempt for her suggestions.

“Or, I don’t know… go compete in a secret underground fight club or something… you know… fun stuff” she said.

“I guess I’ll just head back into work” he said finally, and seemed resolved to that decision. Rey groaned and dropped her head to his chest for a moment, before remembering the time, and stepping back, pressing a light kiss onto his cheek, and smiling at the faint red lip mark on his pale cheek.

“You’re impossible. See you tomorrow” she said. She looked at him from the doorway, sullen, hands clenched in fists, resigned to letting her go, but all so reluctant at the same time.

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“Rey! We were about to take out a missing person’s report on you” Finn said, as Rey approached the group of her friends, crowding around the bar. It was one of their favourite neighbourhood places, before both her and Finn had moved, and it remained one of her best loved spots. The paint was peeling, the leather stools and booths were cracked and a little sticky, the drinks strong and the juke box was ancient and beloved.

“Finn, I told you not to say anything, and it’s literally the first thing you say” Rose accused beside her boyfriend, pushing him aside to give Rey a kiss on the cheek, looking as gorgeous as her namesake in a petal pink dress.

“I wasn’t complaining for me – it’s Jackie that has missed you” Finn said defensively, wrapping an arm around Rey and pulling her in the direction of the jukebox, who they had lovingly named Jackie about two years before.

“Seriously though, you’re a sight for sore eyes”

“It’s been like a few weeks” Rey said with a laugh, as Finn pulled a whole pocket of change out and dropped it on the table beside them.

“It’s been like four weeks and it’s been awful” he said lightly, before slanting a smile at her.

“So… how goes it with Mr extremely tall, dark and broody?” Rey concentrated on her song selection, The Undertones, Teenager Kicks coming through the speakers in the wake of her fingers.

“I’m definitely telling him that nickname” she said, with a small smile. She continued to line up songs, until Finn nudged her hard.

“Well, I’m waiting”

“It goes… well. I think.” She said.

“Oh I see, I see that little, secret smile. Ok, keep your secrets, that’s fine. I’m just glad you’re happy. Jack is, that’s for sure” Finn said as they made their way back to the bar.

“Have you seen him?” she asked.
“Yeah, we watch the game together every week” Finn said, and Rey looked at him in surprise. She guessed she had been a little uninvolved lately, she didn’t even know Finn was making weekly visits to see her uncle.

“I have to get over there more often”

“He’d like that” Finn said, before pushing a drink toward her. Rey nodded, glad he wasn’t going to make her feel worse about her lack of contact. She spoke to Jack nearly daily on the phone, and yet, had only been over to see him twice since he’d moved into the city. She could make all the excuses she wanted, but she knew there weren’t any that meant anything. She’d gotten wrapped up in her new boyfriend and committed the clichéd cardinal sin, and forgotten about everyone else.

She vowed there and then to change it.

Ben worked late into the night. He kept his phone on his desk beside him, but Rey didn’t text or call. He imagined her across the city, laughing and dancing with her friends, shining her light on them, while he was left alone in the dark, as was his natural habitat.

The urge to call her, or text her at least, to reach out and check that she was still his, that he wasn’t banished from her thoughts completely, was strong, and he had to fight himself to prevent doing so. The only reason he was able was because his fear was stronger than his desire to be reassured. Fear that she wouldn’t reassure him, fear that time apart was only making her realise what a mistake she’d made.

He stared at the reports on his desk, his stomach sinking as his mind drifting back to the problem they posed. The results of the second round of trials were as uniform and perfect as the first had been, tickling Ben’s sense of scepticism. They were clearly falsified.

He had suspected for a long time that Snoke was pulling strings and making manoeuvres into sectors that he had no interest in, and were certainly not admirable business practices. The problem was that the apathy and nihilism that had haunted his last few years had put him in the position of being a man who had seemed to condone these very decisions. He suspected that if Rey was not back in his life, he still wouldn’t care where the path Snoke was taking them down was leading. But she was, and now, he did.

On the last page of the report, a slip of paper fell as he lifted the folder. He picked it up, seeing careful writing on the back, tidy, printed script.

“Be careful with your things, you wouldn’t want to lose them” it said, and Ben felt cold prickle through him, his lungs clutching onto his breath, and robbing him of oxygen.

Carefully, he turned over the paper. It was a print out of a digital image. He stared at it for a long time, his eyes following the grainy, black and white outline of two bodies lying in bed. The larger one was wrapped around the smaller, holding her reverently, while she lay innocently in his arms. He could see the thin muslin bandage Rey had put on his shoulder, over a deep lash, where the buckle had bitten in. He could see the way Rey’s hair spilled out over the pillow, like satin.
His shock and fear kept him frozen in place for a good minute or so, his mind racing. He felt panicked and afraid. The time for hesitation was over, it seemed. He had known since Rey had come back into his life, in one way or another, he would have to eliminate Snoke from his life. If he was ever going to be able to offer Rey all she deserved, the life she should have, with a whole man, a family, he would have to make sure that his teacher could never been allowed in their lives. The thought was difficult for him, which made him all the more ashamed. He should want to kill him, beat him down and leave him bloodied and on the cusp of death. Instead, he couldn’t bring himself to think about him, how to end him or otherwise. His emotions concerning the man were a tangled mess of guilt and shame, confusion and fear. To confront him, was to confront his past, confront himself, and he had never been strong enough. But maybe, he could be strong enough for her.

What wouldn’t he do, to protect her?

Taking a deep breath, he reached under his desk for the concealed compartment there, locked with a fingerprint scanner. The little drawer popped open, unseen from the camera placed discretely in the corner of the room. For a long time, he had believed his teacher when he had assured him that he considered a camera in Ben’s own office unnecessary, but now, he could trust nothing and no one. It seems even in that he had been naïve, hardly even suspecting his own home to host cameras too.

Under the desk, he felt in the drawer sightlessly until he found a hard rectangle, and tucked it deep into his palm, removing his hand and standing. He packed up for the night, putting the chemical report in his briefcase and shrugging on a heavy black overcoat.

He left the office, and deliberated outside, looking left and right, taking in the cool night air and traffic of the city, still heavy, despite the late hour. He turned toward his house after a moment, a seemingly spontaneous decision to walk home.

As he walked, he kept his eye open for a specific kind of shop, and popped in when he came to one. Outside again, he ripped the box open of the burner phone, and looked around, searching for anything suspicious. He didn’t see anything, but just the action of looking had made him more paranoid. He pulled the business card he’d retrieved from the office out his pocket and quickly typed in the number, pressing call before he could change his mind.

It rang a few times, before a man’s voice answered. Ben hesitated a moment before speaking.

“I am calling to speak to Holdo. She gave me the number” he said shortly.

“Name?”

“Kylo Ren”

“Hold on” the man instructed. He waited a moment, when the phone was connected.

“Kylo Ren, I am surprised to be hearing from you. You didn’t seem particularly interested in helping us, the last time we spoke”

“Circumstances have changed.”

“Well, I won’t lie. I’m glad to hear it. We shouldn’t talk too long over the phone. Let’s find time to bring you in”

“It needs to be somewhere inconspicuous. I can’t just walk into a precinct”
“Do you think you’re being watched?” The detective asked, and Ben fought the urge to tell her that the sensation of being watched had been one of the only constants in his life.

“I can’t be sure”

“Fine, I’ll come to you then. I’ll be in touch, to find a place and time”

“Fine” he said brusquely, already starting to hang up. The street seemed fairly empty, but for the occasional passer-by. He thought of Snoke, and his probing about Rey, his stomach clenched in fear. Fear for himself had long since ceased to be an issue, perhaps a threat to him in the past had almost been welcomed. Something to break him out his prison, his carefully constructed torture room, even if that meant going to jail or worse.

Now though, there was Rey, and everything was different. He strode to the cub and hailed a cab, anxiety churning through his gut.

The dark of his apartment was no longer soothing, as he stepped into the silent interior. He couldn’t stop going over the things that had been done, things that had been seen, in this apartment. He didn’t care about the times he was alone, the times before Rey. He cared about the thought of Snoke sitting in his dark electronic lair, and putting his eyes on her.

And then, in an even darker impulse, he cared that maybe Snoke had barely spared Rey a glance, the exquisite perfection of her body, her smooth skin and striking face. For looking at Rey was something Ben could understand, who wouldn’t want to look at Rey? He feared that his focus had been elsewhere, the same place it had been for what felt like a lifetime, and the thought made him even sicker.

He started in the bedroom, because he knew the angle the picture was taken from, and started to hunt for the device. He found it fairly quickly, embedded in a light fixture, so integral to the working of the inset bulb he couldn’t fathom when it must have been installed. He wasn’t sure how to take it out, so settled for colouring over the lens with a black sharpie from Rey’s work corner in the sitting room. There were two more, one in the kitchen and one in the spare room. There was nothing in the new part of the apartment, which helped to narrow down the time frame to before, and made him relieved that at least his and Rey’s adventure in the dojo hadn’t been observed.

Snoke would know immediately, of course, and Ben wasn’t sure whether to bring it up himself, or wait until his mentor did. He wouldn’t like it, he would want to quell any sign of rebellion in Ben before it would gather strength, as he had after his father had died and he had reached out to Rey.

He felt panicked and exposed, and the thought of Rey, out in the city somewhere, drinking, laughing and not paying particular attention to her surroundings was too much. He grabbed his phone and quickly dialled her number, waiting impatiently as the call connected, and then went straight to voicemail. He drew it back from his face and stared at it hard. He tried again, and in a fit of fury as voicemail connected again, threw the offending item across the room, where it hit the wall hard, in a smash of glass.

“Always so impetuous, still such a little boy, blushing and furious in his temper tantrums, so lovely and true in your reactions”

Snoke’s words drifted to him, often used comments when his anger got the better of him, when red descended on his vision and his hands had flown almost without thought.

He lowered his face into his hands and let out a low pitched, wounded snarl of anger and fear, the ripping in his throat as the muscles stretched around the rough sound, a soothing pain to his emotions. He felt like an animal being backed into a wall, and there was no way out but to fight.
“Loving you,
Isn’t the right thing to do,
How can I ever change
Things that I feel”

“You are looking well” Poe said, as Rey slammed back his proffered shot and smiled at him, Fleetwood Mac in the background, Finn and Rose twirling around on the tiny, make shift dancefloor behind her. All felt right with the world again.

“Well, at least you aren’t accusing me of disappearing” she said, feeling her head swirl a little as she chased the shot with a mouthful of soda.

“Naw, I wouldn’t. I know what it’s like, to be young and in love” Poe said, his dark eyes twinkling under the bar lights.

“Not you too!” Rey complained, pushing back from the bar, slapping her hands down, jarring her phone where it lay on the bar top. She instinctively touched the screen to check on any messages, and realised that it was dead.

“Damn, out of juice” she muttered as she slipped it in her pocket. Ben wouldn’t like it, was her first thought. If he tried to call and couldn’t, he’d be angry at her. She chewed her lip, before turning to find Finn, still gracing the dancefloor with his own brand of moves.

“Can I borrow your phone a sec?” she asked, already pulling it from his pocket and unlocking it. She scrolled quickly through his contacts, and was relieved to see Ben’s number, no doubt inputted when they’d spilt their medical vigil between them.

She quickly typed out a message

Phone died, sorry, everything ok, will see you tomorrow xx

“Everything ok?” Poe asked, appearing beside her with her drink from the bar. She smiled at him, tucking Finn’s phone back in his pocket, and took a swing of beer.

“That’s it. Dameron, let’s go” she said, and grabbed his hand as she spun him onto the dancefloor. Finn slapped Poe on the back as they appeared beside them, cramming into the small space that the rest of the neighbourhood seemed to have congregated on.
“You can go your own way
You can call it another lonely day”

“Hey!! You can’t just take my pepperoni… you got veggie, for some crazy reason, so you can’t just get veggie and then steal my pepperonis, that’s not fair” Rey argued, swinging her pizza box away from Finn as he pinched another spicy sausage slice. They were walking back to Jacks, pizzas in hand, Rose and Finn stopping to kiss every now and then, Jessika and BB deep in conversation about something or other, and Poe trailing behind with Rey.

Rey smacked Finn’s hand away, and quick as a flash reached out for a slice of Finn’s in retaliation.

“Hey! Not cool! That’s a whole slice…” Finn protested, grabbing back for the pizza, their combined drunkenness making the whole tussle much more funny than it probably was.

“Poe! Help me, man, she’s taking advantage of the birthday boy” Finn implored, and his outraged tone over a pizza slice had Rey laughing harder than ever, doubling up over the stolen slice, unable to drawn breath.

“Its ok buddy, I’ve got this” Poe said, suddenly close to her, and she felt his arms go around her middle, and then he was picking her up around the waist and shaking her up and down, as it to shake loose the pizza.

“Just give up the slice Rey, and no one gets hurt… don’t be a hero” he was laughing into her back as she struggled for breath.

Suddenly, Poe walked them into Rose’s back who had stopped suddenly on the street just outside Jack’s apartment.

“Rey” was all the quiet warning she got before she looked up and saw what had stopped Rose, the rest of her friends drifting over and pausing, Jessika and BB oblivious, Finn taking Rose’s hand, and waving a little to the dark figure on the steps of the walk up, and of course, Poe, gently letting Rey drop down his chest, his hands absently still resting on her waist, as he caught his breath.

“Hey man” Finn said to Ben, looking a little sheepishly to where Rey and Poe were. Ben didn’t respond, his eyes were on Rey, and he didn’t seem to register that anyone else was there really. Rey stepped forward, forcing Poe’s hands to drop from her, clearing her throat and clutching her pizza box to her.

“Ben” was all she said, as she looked around to see all her friends were watching her expectantly now.

“Everyone this is Ben… Ben, this is everyone” she said lamely, but it was far too late, and she was
far too drunk to manage much more.

“We were just going to go upstairs… and eat something” Rey explained, gesturing to the boxes in their hands.

“I doubt Jack will appreciate the interruption, it’s late” Ben said, and Rey flushed, embarrassed to see her friends sharing a similar reaction.

“Jack won’t mind, he already knows, it’s a tradition” Rey said, and hated her way her voice sounded like she was defending herself. She could feel a strange energy of Ben, and knew immediately that it wasn’t the night to introduce him to her friends. He was more Kylo Ren than Ben at the moment, and she wasn’t introducing that guy to anyone.

“Why don’t you guys go up? I’ll just be up in a minute” she said suddenly, and forced a bright smile. If her friends thought it was weird that she wasn’t just inviting Ben upstairs with them, they didn’t say anything, just filed past and entered the building.

Silence fell outside on the street, and Rey looked at Ben, sitting on the steps, still dressed in his suit, dark and a little unkempt, his curls a little more unruly than usual, his eyes seemed defeated.

“Why’s your phone off?” he asked.

“Ran out of battery. Didn’t you get my text? I sent it from Finn’s phone” she said, seeing a muscle twitch in his jaw as he shook his head slowly.

“What’s wrong Ben?” she asked after a long moment of silence. His shoulders were tensed up almost to his ears. He gazed impassively out at the curb, and she realised with a start that there was a taxi sitting there, meter running.

“Time to go” he said, standing up, and stepping toward the car. Rey watched him curiously, unmoving, until he turned at the door of the cab and held his hand out for her.

“Come on, let’s go” he muttered, and Rey’s heart dropped.

“What? I’m staying here. We agreed” she said quietly, a squirming sense of dread descending over her.

“No, we didn’t agree. You informed me, and I didn’t challenge you on it” he said flatly, and she searched his face for a hint of Ben, but there was nothing.

“Well, that was like agreeing… you let me tell my friends”

“Well, now you can tell them otherwise” he bit out, his patience seeming to run short, and Rey felt a surge of anger in her chest at his high handedness.

“No, I’m not doing that”

“Yes, you are doing that. You are going to do exactly what I say” he said, suddenly stepping much closer to her, and staring down at her, the only hint of emotion on his face a weary cast across his eyes.

“Ben-“

“Rey – don’t test me. Not tonight” he said softly, his eyes pleasing with her for a moment and she heard a million unspoken things in that request. Her heart softened even as her mind still rebelled.
“You said-“ she tried again and bit off in frustration when the hard mask slammed into place again.

“Well, I changed my mind. Get in the car” he said, and turned, taking her arm as he did. She wrenched it from his grasp, her lack of sobriety making everything feel muted and strange.

“No! You’d have to make me, because you can’t expect me just to run around, following orders like a good little…” she broke off, suddenly aware of her words and the implications. Ben saw when she realised what she’d said.

“I can’t expect you follow orders? You’re right. Why would I? You’ve done nothing but fight me every step of the way, when only a month ago, you promised to try”

“It’s hard to let you tell me what to do when I don’t understand why you make the decisions you do”

“That’s what trusting someone means… it means you don’t have to know every justification, you trust them, and let them decide for you. I never lied about needing that, I gave you fair warning.” He growled, prowling back toward her, as she refused to give him an inch of space back, and glared up at him.

“I thought you meant – “

“In the bedroom, that’s all? You thought you’d allow me to tie you up and fuck you senseless, bend you over and tell you when and if you could come? That you could fix me like that?” he was saying lowly, and Rey fought the flush working it’s way over her whole body. Ben’s words were ugly, and the sneer in his tone was brutal. The way he was looking at her at odds with the detachment in his voice. His look was possessive fury and anguish, even while he hurled barbed words at her.

Rey took a deep breath, the cool night air, and the awful things they were saying to each other working the alcohol out her mind quickly. They were going down a dark path, a destructive one, one that might even bring her mission to save Ben to an untimely end. He was right, she had promised to try, and as arbitrary and hurtful as she found him showing up and ordering her home, she had to do it. She had to do it, or abandon all semblance of trying.

She looked at him, really looked, and saw his hands clenched at his sides, trembling with anger and frustration, his breath, held and still as he watched her with eyes that weren’t actually angry, as she thought they’d be. They were fearful. Afraid of her reaction, afraid of her refusal.

“I have to make an excuse, and say goodnight to Jack” she said stiffly, before turning on her heel and stomping toward the stairs. She didn’t want to see the triumphant look on his face, couldn’t stand it.

“5 minutes” Ben said below her, and she shot a scowl at him.

“Don’t push your luck”

“5 minutes Rey, or I’m coming up and carrying you down” she didn’t turn back to dignify that with a response, but took great pleasure flipping him off as she disappeared through the doors.

Chapter End Notes
Hey guys! So sorry for being so slow.. I promise I'm not losing steam, just trying to wrangle all the bits I want into place... Thank you for all the continued support!

Songs -

Go your own way - Fleetwood Mac

Comments are love xxx
The doorbell ringing brought Rey out of her old familiar nightmare, the same warehouse, with its same labyrinthine corridors, and empty rooms and she awoke with a start. She sat upright, looking around the spare room, her chest moving quickly, her hair stuck to her face with sweat and her mouth dry and awful. A beat later, and her hangover headache hit, and she groaned, flopping backward the in the bed, until the doorbell rang again, and she dragged herself out.

The apartment was quiet, and she could immediately tell she was alone, and she was relieved, as she made it to the door, shoving her hair back and looking through the peephole to see a delivery person there. Her and Ben had barely spoken on the taxi ride home and she had disappeared into the spare room when she got home, and he hadn’t stopped her. It had made her relieved and sad at the same time, as she’d lain in the dark, going over the shared, puzzled glances of her friends and Jack as she she had stood in the doorway the night before, explaining how something had come up, and she had to go.

She opened the door, still on the chain, as the man looked at her through the gap.

“Delivery for Miss Nessuno”

“Yeah, that’s me” Rey said, about to slip the chain off, when the man popped it through the space.

“It’s fine, just a quick signature please” he said, offering her the stylus. She quickly scribbled something unintelligible and pulled the door closed as the man moved away.

She took the box into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee, while grabbing a knife out the drawer to slit open the box. She riffled through, opening another box inside, and peering down. What she saw sent her coffee bursting out her mouth in a fine spray over the counter.

Gingerly, she set her coffee down and reached inside the box, pulling the smaller, velvet lined box out, and setting it on the butcher’s block. She stared at it like it was a snake. She looked back into the box for a note or something. She found one toward the bottom, a heavy watermarked card, with careful, flowing script on it.

Beautiful jewels for a beautiful woman

She read the first part, her eyes drifted back to the offending item, nestled on a deep green bed of velvet. The diamonds sparkled in a shaft of morning sun, falling from the high windows to the side.

It was so beautiful, and so ugly all at once, she thought, picking it up and turning it in her hands.
The neck part was encrusted with jewels, and she wondered wildly if they were real. It had a small, hidden catch at the back, and was lined with a soft and supple leather on the inside, so as not to cause discomfort, she guessed critically, though it seemed inevitable. Attached to the neck part, was a sinuous, coiling rope of silver and gold, shining links, with tiny studded jewels decorating it, ending in a loop. It’d be much too small for Ben’s hands, she thought darkly as she glared at the thing, and set it down, her stomach churning and her brain unable to process her so-called gift for the moment. Her eyes drifted back down to the note, and she read the last sentence again, tried to imagine Ben writing it, and just couldn’t. But he must have, she thought numbly. *A fitting collar for an unwilling slave*

Rey took a gulp of coffee, her third of the day, and squinted down at the street from the kitchen she was standing in, on the third floor of First Order Finance.

The rest of the weekend had been awful, and her and Ben were hardly speaking. After her interesting gift had arrived, she’d gotten dressed and gone to Jacks for the day, leaving a note on the counter for Ben, and putting the box that had come and it’s note in the spare room. Out of sight, and hopefully out of mind. What Ben had been thinking, to send her something like that, never mind after the night that had just gone before it, she couldn’t guess, but there was something going on with him, and she wasn’t going to be the one to bring it up.

She’d come back late and gone straight to the spare room, though she had been relieved to see he was home.

Today, he was up and out again, before she’d woken, and now, she was at his office, starting the project up again, as per the schedule Jessika had gone over with Margot, and she wasn’t sure if Ben even knew.

She wasn’t even that mad about Finn’s party anymore, the whole fight had just become about who was going to give in first, apologise, or smooth things over. She knew she was stubborn to a fault, and Ben was too.

Maybe they’d just never speak again, she thought glumly as she welcomed the hot liquid down her throat. With the poor sleeping and the tension at home, and now, late afternoon already, it was starting to get to her. She heard a throat clear behind her, and glanced over her shoulder, only to feel her headache intensify.

“I had thought Ren was joking about you and your little friend coming back. Sadly, I seem to be mistaken.”

“Great observation skills, Huxy” she bit out, turning to face the man who had entered, his blue eyes narrowing at her.

“Don’t call me that, I’m your superior”
“Actually, you aren’t, so I guess I’ll call you whatever I want, Taj… or do you prefer Armila?” Rey said vindictively, her bad mood finding a welcome target. He reeled away, a scowl forming across his features, before his face slanted into a smirk.

“My my, aren’t we full of confidence now you’re getting on your knees for Ren? How dignified, still, I’d expect nothing less from a scavenger like you. I suppose I should ask how much it’s costing him, if it’ll be a write off along with the renovations, a business expense” Hux said, and Rey felt the blow, all the old insecurities he was so good at picking at. She swallowed hard, and she saw Hux’ eyes fall to her neck, and then she felt her cheeks reddened as she watched him realise that he’d upset her.

“That’s a good question” she said slowly, gathering herself and meeting his eye, tilting her chin up at him, like she had when she was a teenager with everything to prove.

“It’s an important question. So, let’s go ask him” she said, and turned on her heel and matched from the kitchen. She heard Hux shake himself from his surprise behind her, and follow.

“Wait” he demanded as she shook off his grasping fingers and strode toward the lift, anger propelling each step.

“I said, wait, damn it!” Hux breathed as she reached her destination and pressed the button.

“Why? I think he would love for you to ask him that question, to his face and I know I’d love to see it” she said, flashing a violent smile at Hux, who was growing paler by the moment. She waited for the lift to arrive impatiently.

“Stop – You’ve made your point” Hux ground out, and Rey whirled on him, inspecting him closely.

“What point would that be?”

“That I shouldn’t have said that”

“Because it’s a shitty thing to say to someone, or because you’re so pathetically afraid of Kylo Ren?”

“The first one” he bit out, and Rey looked him in the eye, before breaking away with a scoff.

“Right, your poker face sucks by the way” she said, as the lift arrived and doors opened.

“Ok, fine. I am afraid of Kylo Ren, and so is anyone else with half a brain.” He said, holding his hands up in a peace-making gesture as Rey got into lift and reached out to close the doors. Hux made a move to come inside, and she held her hand up, stopping him.

“No way, I don’t trust you in an enclosed space” she said, and stared at him as he watched the doors close, red creeping up his pale cheeks as she left to decide his fate.

She decided she might as well go and actually see Ben, a moment later, when the lift opened on his floor. The whole exchange had made her upset, and there was one person who’d make her feel better. This whole fight had dragged on too long, she decided suddenly, as she often did when arguing with someone, and she was ready for it to be over.

She walked along the quiet, carpeted hall and paused outside his office, mentally cracking her knuckles, before knocking softly.
“Come” she heard him call, his lowly, gravelly voice so welcome after a few days of silence. She opened the door, and peered inside. He was sitting behind his desk, turned toward the window, with the phone at his ear. His suit jacket was off, and his dark blue shirt was rolled at the sleeves to his elbows. He turned slightly to see who had knocked without hanging up, and eyebrows twitching in surprise as he saw her lingering in the doorway.

“I’ll call you back” he said abruptly and put the phone down. She bit her lip and looked at it.

“I hope that wasn’t anyone important” she murmured as she edged into the room. He had turned his seat and now sat looking at her, his face a little wistful as he took her in, and waved dismissively at the phone.

“I was about to come and find you” he said softly.

“Ah, I wasn’t sure if you’d remembered I’d be here today” he smiled at her statement.

“As though I could forget, anyway, Margot keeps me updated with the schedule”

“Yours or mine?” She queried, raising an eyebrow at him. He looked at her a long moment, no doubt trying to understand if she’d come to continue their fight or not, before opting to change the subject.

“How is everything going? Do you need anything?” Yes, Rey thought to herself, you to come back from where ever it is you’ve gone. She shook her head.

“I’m all set, though I might have given Hux a heart attack. If you see him later, be sure to frown at him intimidatingly. I’m sure you can manage, it’s your default setting” she said, sitting down in the seat across from him, and sipping her coffee, almost forgotten in her hand.

He smiled a little more naturally then, obviously deciding she didn’t want to fight, and the tension melted out his shoulders.

“Why were you coming to find me?” she asked after a while, as they sat and looked at each other, enjoying being in each other’s company after the horrible, strained weekend.

“I have a meeting outside the city tonight. I’ll be back late.” He said, standing up and stretching behind the desk, before making his way around to her side, and leaning a hip on the wooden edge before her.

“I wish I could take you with me-“

“I have class, down at the Knights of Ren” Rey reminded him, and he nodded, frowning a little.

“Stay in touch with me, text me…. Before class, after class. When you get home, when you go to bed. Same number” He said, tapping a new mobile on the desk, and she rolled her eyes. He reached out suddenly and caressed her cheek, the movement was so gentle and tentative, it lowered her guard, and the scathing set down she had been about to deliver.

“Please, just indulge me.” the last was a whisper. She found herself nodding slowly, her eyes locked to his.

“Ben, are you alright?” she asked, standing up before him and stepping closer so that her thighs rested against his knees, and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“I am now. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to embarrass you, I shouldn’t have done that. I apologise” he
breathe into her hair, as he pulled her forward to rest his chin on her shoulder, his whole body seeming to let go of its strength all at once.

“I’m sorry too, you were upset, and I was fighting you about it, and it just made it worse… just, don’t shut me out, Ben” she said, pulling back to look into his eyes, hazel in the afternoon light. He leant forward to kiss her, and then, at the last moment, pulled himself back, his eyes shooting to the corner, and Rey remembered the camera at the same time. He gave her a tight-lipped smile.

“At home”

“You promise?” she replied, settling for hugging him instead, but the moment was broken with the reminder of Snoke, and they gently untangled themselves and sat back down.

“I meant to ask you, did something come for me? A delivery?” he asked, and Rey looked at him sharply. He was looking steadily back, with no hint of his thoughts.

“Like what?” she asked innocently.

“Documents” he answered. She shook her head, wondering what kind of game he was playing, before deciding just to let him play it.

“When do you leave?” she asked, finding her coffee now cold, and setting it on the desk.

“Right away, I’m afraid” he said.

“I’m sorry about the weekend” she said again, meaning it with all her heart.

“Not as much as I am” he said confidently, giving her a smile, the one he seemed to reserve just for her.

After she’d left Ben’s office and wandered back down to the lower levels, she felt melancholic. They had barely made up and now he’d be home late, and being here, under Snoke’s scrutiny she couldn’t even properly kiss him goodbye.

She finished up her work for the day, avoiding Hux, except to give him a sweet smile on his way out as he looked nervously at her. She knew Ben had already left and that strange sad feeling dogged her. She hated to fight, it felt like a waste of time, and now, the prospect of an evening without Ben felt incredibly hard, even when she had slept in another room from him last night, fuelled by indignant anger. She had it bad, she recognised all the symptoms. The up and down, the crash and swell of strong emotions, that left her shaken in their wake.

She was once again in love with Ben Solo, her friends were right. Perhaps she had never even fallen out of love with him after all, in their time apart. Either way, it was back with a vengeance now.

The office was emptying out, and the light was fading from the sky earlier and earlier. It would be thanksgiving next week, and they were going to Leia’s house for dinner. She was nervous but excited. Then it would be Christmas. The year was flying by, she mused as she headed to the lifts,
the only one waiting before the impressive, shining bank of doors.

When one arrived, she stepped in quickly and waited to for the doors to close, after pressing the lobby. The lift hesitated a long moment, once the doors had slid shut. She frowned at it, and pressed the button again, and blinked in surprise as she felt the elevator start, but a subtle sliding feeling of going up surrounded her.

She watched in disbelief as the floors lit up, going up, instead of down. Great, she thought sourly. She was stuck on a glitching lift, and would probably be late for class. She tried pressing another button, but saw it made no difference as the lift continued upwards, soon reaching the executive floor. She prepared to get out, expecting the contraption to stop there, at the end of the possible listed floors and froze as she felt the lift continue.

There were no more lights to light up, no more floors, according to the buttons, but still she went up, and then, finally, stopped. She felt nerves rush through her as the lift came to rest. She wondered what was beyond the doors, cables and the workings of the lift? Had it broken and was about to plummet her down 30 floors?

The doors slid open, and she was both relieved and taken aback to see a foyer appear, dimly lit in red, shrouded in shadows. She heard music playing, it sounded faint, something classical, the strains drifting to her down the creepy hall to the side of the empty room before her.

She stepped back into the lift, and pressed the lobby, unwilling to stick around here any longer. Nothing happened. She pressed the door close button. Nothing happened. She held it down, and still, nothing happened.

Her heart was starting to beat louder and louder in her ears as she looked around the lift, and saw in the corner a camera, its red light blinking at her. Suddenly, music flooded the space around her, almost deafeningly loud. She cried out and stepped out the lift, clamping her hands over her ears. As soon as her foot had cleared the doors, they shut soundlessly behind her. She pressed the button, already sure that it wouldn’t come, and looked around. The music was quieter now, leading more than pushing her in a direction.

She knew who it was who was inviting her to visit. She knew who was waiting for her in the shadows of a floor that shouldn’t exist. Squaring her shoulders, she glanced at another camera, watching her, and then followed the music, into the darkness.

The corridor slowly led to a room, also poorly lit, but this time, the walls were swathed in screens, each displaying various rooms of the building. The sheer number of them was overwhelming. She looked around, trying to get her bearings, while her gaze quickly fell on the man waiting for her. He sat on a medical looking chair, attached to some sort of machinery. The red light glinted off a bulging bag of an IV. He was so much more unsettling than the last time she’d seen him. He was watching her with an unwavering intensity. She stopped on the threshold and stared right back.

“Welcome, young Rey. Thank you for accepting my invitation to visit” Snoke spoke first.

“I could hardly refuse” she pointed out, gripping her hands into fists to keep calm. He smiled a little indulgently.

“Quite. I must confess, I have been so curious to meet you again and see how the years have treated you” he said. Rey found herself unable to tear her eyes from the old man and his truly creepy energy.

“Better than they have you, it seems. Karma’s a bitch” Rey said, gesturing to the equipment
flanking him. He heaved a wheezy cough at her words, and she thought for a moment he was having a fit, then realised it must be what passed for laughing for him.

“What spunk, I can see what Kylo Ren sees in you, even if it does not hold the same appeal for me” he said, his eyes dropping down her body for a moment, making sheer, unbridled rage shoot through Rey.

“Don’t speak about Ben to me. Don’t you dare, you… monster” she swore, fists once again bunching at her sides. The amount of anger she felt was almost enough to make her nauseous. She burned and writhed with the desire to met out justice.

“Ben, is it? He lets you call him Ben… how interesting” Snoke mused, and Rey cursed herself for a second, for letting something personal slip.

“I trust you received my gift?” Snoke said suddenly, and Rey felt a weight lift of her chest.

“It is the very same one I give all his… arrangements. And there has been a great many, make no mistake.” He continued, as Rey crossed her arms over her chest and watched him impassively.

“For by now I am sure you are familiar with Ben’s predilections. His need for dominance and pain, both to give and receive” Snoke was saying, and Rey fought to control her expression, sure that Snoke was digging for a nerve.

“His desire to hurt others, control them… his desire to be feared” Snoke said, and then seemed to change tactics as his words failed to elicit a reaction.

“You have no idea the number of women I have had to pay off, when he’s gone too far, pushed them too much… hurt them… irreparably.” Snoke said, and now Rey was sure he was lying. She thought of Eliza and how Ben had cared about her recovery so very much, so afraid to be the reason someone else was hurt.

“I do hope the same fate does not befall you my dear” Snoke said, with mock concern that made Rey smile.

“That’s sweet of you. And what will you do, if it does?”

“Why, I will see you properly taken care of, you won’t have to see Ben again, I will smooth everything over” Snoke said, confident that she was believing him.

“And you’d take care of Ben, right? Be a comfort to him… in his time of need?” She said, her true feelings for Snoke rippling across her features in a twist of disgust. He stared at her a long moment.

“Cut the crap, I don’t believe you. I won’t believe a word you say about Ben, so you can stop trying to scare me – it won’t work. Whatever you tell me, I’ll just ask him. You have no power over me” she said, looking down her nose at what she was quickly coming to think of as the worst excuse for a man on the planet.

“I can see by your expression that you think you know something about mine and Ben’s relationship” Snoke said, settling back almost comfortably under her angry glare.

“I can assure you, whatever it is you think you know… it’s wrong” Snoke said, with a confidence that bridled Rey instantly.

“I know that you preyed on an innocent child, while his parent’s backs were turned. I know that you’ve manipulated him into isolating himself from everyone who loves him, I know that he feels
unable to have normal relationships because of your influence… I know you abused him—"

“As I thought… you don’t know anything” Snoke cut her off, his calm tone breaking into something sharper for a moment, a hint of anger, and it soothed Rey. She’d hit a nerve.

“What would you call it? The grooming of a minor… an innocent child - what’s the name you would use?”

“Love” Snoke said, and Rey felt the coffee she had drank before, threaten to return, only moments before she turned her heard and brought up a mouthful of acrid liquid, her stomach trembling, her throat convulsing. At length, her stomach now a cavernous hole, she pressed her hand to her mouth, and wiped the sour residue away. She swallowed, and looked up, her eyes blurry with tears.

“How dramatic and unnecessary” Snoke said in a tone of disgust, and Rey couldn’t stop the pained gasp that fell from her lips.

“You’re even more twisted than I thought” she accused slowly, trying to still her racing heart and sweating palms. Her visceral reaction to the man’s words, to his view of Ben, had cut her to the core.

“A matter of opinion. The truth remains that I am the most influential person in Ben’s life. I am his longest lasting relationship. I am the one person who never left. I am the one who has always been with him.” Snoke said.

“It is me that Ben entered willing into an adult business relationship with. It is me who Ben consults on matters of his life, and trusts advice from. It is me who has loved him most” Snoke’s final words were a vicious snarl, triumphant and threatened at the same time.

“I am the love of Ben Solo’s life, and he is mine” Snoke said finally, and Rey felt a tear drip down her cheek, quickly followed by another.

There was such depraved affection and possession in Snoke’s tone, it pressed the horror of Ben’s trauma all the harder into her heart. She fought the urge to turn in on herself and crawl into a ball and cry. Cry for Ben and for all the suffering and all the time that had carried it, so very very long.

She might have done it too, if she hadn’t noticed the flash of vulnerability on Snoke’s face, as he watched her carefully. A naked and open sort of fear there, and all at once, it made sense. She pushed her tears down. There would be time for them later. Now was time to set the record straight.

“If you believe that – then why are you so afraid of me?” Rey asked, her voice steady now. She advanced a step, and was gratified to see Snoke lean backward in his chair, his shrewd face guarded.

“I am not afraid of you, child” he murmured. Rey barked a laugh, and it visibly shook Snoke.

“I bet you wish I was a child, much easier to handle, aren’t they? Much easier to shush up, and confuse and manipulate.” She said, advancing closer still. Snoke’s hands gripped his chair.

“But I’m not a child. I’m a woman, and I’m stronger than you and I’m not going to let you hurt Ben anymore” she said, stopping just in front of him, so he was forced to look up at her.

“When you make Ben chose – he’ll chose me and you know it, and it scares you to death” Rey half whispered, her eyes glued to Snoke’s, her dangerous intent gleaming in them.

“He’s chosen me over everyone in his life before, even his own mother, even you…” Snoke
reminded her. Rey considered it a moment, before leaning forward and placing her hands on the chair arms, atop Snoke’s wrists. She felt his fragile bones and paper like skin, pushing aside her physical revulsion at touching him.

“There’s a difference between Ben choosing you – and Ben pushing away the people he loves, to save them, to protect them.”

“We will see. You won’t be all he needs… you can’t be. You won’t allow yourself to be. We will see, soon enough.” Snoke said tightly, as he pulled back from her as he could be without flinching.

“Yes, we will” Rey said, with calm certainty, and smiled somewhat fiercely. She slowly squeezed Snoke’s wrists, grinding the bones together, aware that she was slowly entering the territory where she had beaten Unkar Plutt, in a fit of retribution. The darkness in Rey, always there, but usually balanced by the light, was spreading a little in the face of this monster.

“Reduced to threats now, are we? Fitting, considering your background. Does Ben know? How bloodthirsty you really are? How uncouth?” Snoke snarled, twisting his hands under her hard grip.

“Ben knows everything about me. Of course, he does - ” she said, finally letting go and straightening.

“- I’m the love of his life” she finished with a viscous smile, turning toward the exit and making to leave. She stopped just on the threshold and shot a final look back.

“And we both know it”

“You may be right, young Rey, but you are discounting one thing” Snoke’s voice called to her, and she couldn’t resist listening, though she couldn’t bring herself to look back.

“I am in his mind, even if he doesn’t see me, even if I am gone… I will never leave him, not really. I am a part of him, as he is of me”

Rey forced herself to leave, her fists clenched at her sides, resisting the urge to go back and find something to smash Snoke’s skull in with. His last words latching onto her, as she called the lift, and this time it obeyed her.

She dreamed through class at the community centre, running in late and then spending the next hour distracted. Her mind was stuck in that room, in the dark, with that thing that called himself a man. A teacher, no less. She felt the responsibility of being a teacher, a trusted person, standing in front of her class, and knew it to be a sacred duty. She felt colder and more distant in every passing moment.

She had wanted to break his wrists, snap the tender bones beneath her strong fingers. She had wanted to hurt him, make him break and gasp with pain. She had wanted to physically harm him with every part of her, and in that moment, she had felt like an animal. Her depth of anger and violence toward Snoke had scared her, shocked her really.
And his words, sweet targeted poison continued to float around her head, as he had no doubt planned.

She took the train home in a blur, and up to the apartment, letting herself into the dark space. Leaving the lights off, she had kicked her trainers off and walked over to her favourite spot by the window and rested her forehead on the glass.

*You won’t be all he needs*

*It is me, who has loved him most*

What made the words so upsetting was the conviction in Snoke’s voice. She swallowed hard, a painful lump having lodged there since the hateful encounter.

*I am in his mind – I will never leave him*

The last continued to haunt her, continued to make tears press behind her eyelids. Was Ben doomed to carry the spectre of his abuser for the rest of his life? Would it always cripple him, freeze him into merely surviving instead of living. If she succeeded in helping Ben free himself of First Order and Snoke, what about the ghost in Ben’s mind?

She let out a deep breath, and glanced at her watch, seeing it was getting late. Ben would be home soon.

She went to the spare room and pulled out the gift box, Snoke’s present and took it through to their room. She changed slowly, stripping off her gym clothes, and pulling a light robe on, the underfloor heating in the apartment making her cosy despite the cool fall temperature outside.

She swept her hair up on top of her head and secured it in a bun, before kneeling on the bed and carefully removing the collar from the box, turning it in the light, the stones twinkling merrily.

Curious, she went to the mirror and carefully fastened the collar around her neck, looking at her reflection. It fit easily, looking more like a statement necklace than anything else and the leash fell loosely down between her breasts.

She heard the front door open, and Ben’s heavy tread enter the apartment, and considered taking the object off, then considered keeping it on. He moved around in the kitchen, and she heard the tap running. She twisted on the seat before the mirror and waited him to find her.

Her heart was beating hard, and all she could hear was Snoke telling her that she wouldn’t be able to be what he needed.

“Rey?” she heard him say from the hall, and then he was filling the doorway. He smiled as he saw her, still awake, and perhaps even waiting for him, his eyes soft. And then, his eyes flickered to the collar, and a frown crossed his forehead, and his smile was falling away.

“Where did you get that?” he asked, almost a whisper. She turned on the chair to fully face him, trying to judge his reaction.

“It was delivered… I thought it was from you” she admitted, seeing his hands clench into fists at his sides. He shook his head. He seemed paralysed by the sight of her wearing the collar. Whetting her lips, Rey carefully slid to her knees, taking up a kneeling position, and saw Ben recoil.

He stepped back, his blank expression falling into a pained one.
“Rey – don’t. Get up” he pleaded softly. She kept her eyes trained on his, and willed her body into submission.

“Ben, look at me. Ben” she had to say again, to drag his eyes from her neck. His gaze locked onto her, and she could read every emotion there. Slowly, she raised the leash, extending the handle part to him, and held it there, unwavering in the air.

“If this is what you want… what you need, I’ll do it. I’ll do it for you.” She said steadily, and his eyes on hers reflected an unfathomable uncertainty and look of incredulousness.

“Why?” he asked in a broken tone.

“Because, I love you Ben. I loved you then, and I love you now, and I’ll still love you tomorrow” she said, feeling it almost a relief to say the words to him. In all their broken and imperfect shells, telling him the words that had lived inside her for so long, felt like becoming whole.

He was watching her with an absolute stillness and she lost count of the seconds that passed between them, eyes locked.

With a jerk, he took a step forward, and then another. Rey couldn’t tear her eyes away as he slowly sank to his knees in front of her, sinking onto his heels, bringing them level. He slowly raised a hand to hers, her fingers still wrapped around the leash, and gently pushed it down until it rested on her lap. Then, he raised his fingers to the collar, and rested them on it. Rey swallowed another lump that had developed in her throat, as she saw his eyes misting with emotion, tinging them red, holding back a storm of emotion. His fingers reached for the clasp at the back of the collar, and after a moment, he was pulling it away, and coiling the leash around it, before slowly and purposefully laying it down on the floor to the side of him.

He didn’t speak, couldn’t seem to. She saw words work up his throat and die on his lips. She saw when he realised the only way he had of showing her his feelings, his devotion. He lowered his gaze from hers, and she immediately missed it, but not before she saw a long tear snake down his porcelain cheek. Then his head was lowering, and his forehead touching her knees. His back suddenly moved with a sharp shake, and he pressed his face further into her legs, the wet warmth of his emotions, felt but unseen.

She gently ran a hand through his hair, before burying her fingers in it, and caressing soothing circles on the back of his neck, his scalp, his shoulders, all while Ben gave her the most precious thing he could. His submission. While he spoke silent promises into her skin.

In time, it could have been hours, or days, he eventually turned his head to rest a cheek against her thigh. She ran her fingers down his cheek, wiping away tears. She felt him press a kiss against her knuckles.

“Rey” he said, his voice gravelly with spent feeling.

“Hmm” she hummed as she traced his full lips with a fingertip.

“I love you too” he said, bringing a smile to her lips, something she had thought impossible after the horror of the day.

“I know”
“Do you understand the risks the implications of working with us?” Holdo asked, her directness always cutting to the heart of the situation. Ben sipped the stale coffee in front of him, before nodding curtly.

“If it comes to it, you will be called to testify, you will have to be held accountable for your standing by, your witnessing… I need you to be prepared for that” Ben gripped the cup hard. The hard nosed detective was only telling him some necessary truths. He deserved fall back, from everything First Order had been doing, most of which, he was ashamed to say he didn’t even know. The depths of Snokes meddling and orchestration, the funds diverted to disturbing research and extremist groups, the casual everyday cheating of honest people. Yes, he deserved punishment, he thought wearily. There wasn’t a lot he was sure of anymore, but that he was a person deserving of punishment, was always certain.

“Of course, if there was someone else in the organisation, who could back up your ignorance of some of the worst offenses…” Holdo continued, regarding the solemn man before her. He shook his head, his downcast eyes drawn and tight.

“There is no one. I am responsible for my actions” Ben said shortly, his hand flexing around the Styrofoam up. There were meeting again in a seedy motel outside of the city, arrived separately. Holdo was recording their conversation, as she always did, and carefully storing away any documents that Ben managed to sneak out of First Order.

“You must also think of after. Snoke does not seem like a man willing to take betrayal lightly. Are you thinking ahead about how to cope with any possible fall back?” she continued on. Ben let out a long breath in the wake of her words, before his generous mouth twisted a little to the side, and his dark eyes fixed back on the wall near her head.

“No… he won’t hurt me.” He said it with a certainly that twisted Amilyn’s heart. She knew there was another, abandoned investigation into Snoke, and his activities in the area where Ben Solo, the man who now called himself Kylo Ren, had grown up. An incident that had exposed that perhaps a pedophile ring had been operating, but the investigation had failed to turn up concrete evidence, and no one had come forward with any more than speculation. If a real witness, victim, her heart whispered as she watched the taciturn man before her, had come forward, maybe Snoke would have already been behind bars.

But that was that, and her department was looking into the pharma angle. It seemed Snoke was someone who liked to flout rules and disrespect common human decency on all fronts.

“There’s no need to be a martyr, Mr Ren. If there is a way to exonerate you from wrongdoing, I don’t understand why you wouldn’t explore it.”
“Believe me Detective. I have no desire to end up imprisoned, and I will fight it, but ultimately, I
deserve whatever punishment I get.”

“How old were you, when you first met Snoke?” she asked suddenly, almost afraid to know the
answer. He looked steadily back at her, refusing to drop her gaze.

“I was 8.”

“Family friend?”

“Tutor. My parents were… out of town a lot.” he said, and she schooled her face into impassivity.
She clicked off the tape recorder and placed it in her bag.

“Let’s conclude for today. I’ll be in touch, and if you can make effort to get what we talked about.”
He nodded again, rising and slipping into his heavy coat, as she also donned hers. She gestured for
him to go, meaning to follow behind later, once he was clear. He approached the door, stopping
with his hand on the knob.

“There is someone I would worry about, if I was imprisoned. Someone I fear Snoke would target,
which I could not allow to happen”

“Your partner?”

“Rey Nessuno.”

“Does she know what you are doing?” Holdo asked, already guessing the answer. Ben tilted his
head at her in a farewell. Men like Ren were master secret keepers, having done it their whole
lives.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Detective Holdo.”

“Mr Ren…” Holdo called, as he went to open the door.

“Sometimes the choices we make are influenced so heavily by the past, it’s impossible to separate
them. Sometimes, a choice is made not by ourselves, but the people who have shaped us… and if
so… are we really to blame?” He seemed to consider her words a moment, his dark features
softening for her just for a glimpse.

“My teacher taught me that the time to make the excuses of a child is confined to childhood, for
‘when I became a man, I put away childish things’. A man makes his choices, and he lives with
them. You cannot be exempt from that, and still expect to be called a man” he said quietly, and
then, was opening the door and disappearing into the night.
Rey dropped the pan filled with green beans over the steamer and leant against one of the high stools surrounding the island in the kitchen. It spun a little behind her, clearly not made for actual sitting, and she lowered herself to the floor instead. Sinking her back gratefully against the sturdy cupboards, she let her head fall backwards against the units.

She had to be possessed to think she could pull this off. When Leia had invited them for Thanksgiving dinner, Rey had happily accepted. Then she had called Jack, and as she had spoken to him, she had of course realised that it meant that she wouldn’t see him on Thanksgiving and he’d be alone. And then, after a less than enthusiastic response from Ben about spending the holiday at his old home, she had hit upon the perfect solution. She would host Thanksgiving. Ben would be comfortable as he’d be at home, their home, as he insisted on calling it, and she could invite Jack and whoever else she wanted over.

She had invited Finn and Rose, and after a moments deliberation, Jessika and Poe. She thought they’d be good company for each other, especially if Ben was as withdrawn as she worried he might be, plus it would make Jack happy. All of this had been fine, until Rose had announced she’d be going home for the holiday, given that her sister Paige was having major relationship trouble. The two girls planned to spend the time deep in sisterly girl chat, and even Finn wasn’t invited. Then, just yesterday, Jessika had been given a surprised trip to an interior décor expo in Paris by her uncle. Suffice to say, she wasn’t coming either. So, it was down to Finn and Poe.

All in all, it had seemed like a decent plan, but now it was falling down on one simple fact. Rey couldn’t seem to hold together the cooking part. There were a million things to do, and not enough time to do them, and everything had to be coordinated, and she just felt like giving up and ordering take out. If it hadn’t been for Leia coming, she would have, but she found herself curiously eager to show her culinary hosting skills off in front of Ben’s mother. Something she was choosing not to examine too closely at the moment.

“Rey?” she heard Ben’s voice from the doorway, and raised a hand over her head, waving weakly.

“Down here” she called, aware of her shiny face and hair stuck down in wayward strands as well as her cranberry splattered apron and general air of failure. Jack appeared beyond the counter, looking down at her with a mixture of concern and amusement.

“Why didn’t you tell me this was so hard?” she complained.

“Why do you think we always used to get something nukable?” he laughed, and Rey resisted rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, like I can serve a TV dinner to Leia Organa-Solo!” she grumbled as she picked.

“I can’t see you being satisfied with one of those tiny dinners” Ben said lightly, coming around the counter to offer her his hand.

“One! Rey used to put away three at a sitting, at least” Jack chuckled, as Ben pulled Rey to her feet and brushed a kiss to her forehead.

“Sounds like my girl” he whispered into her hair.

“Enough, don’t forget your mother is coming over in a little bit, I’m sure she has some great stories to tell” Rey scowled, turning back to the counter, fairly groaning with food, some half prepared,
other items still in the bag. Ben exchanged a glance with Jack, before shedding his jacket, and folding back the cuffs of his shirt.

“What do you need help with?” he prompted. Rey chewed her lip, looking over at the table helplessly. Ben reached for a pack of cranberries.

“Well, these need to become sauce, I guess?” Rey nodded.

“Is the turkey on?” he asked, glancing at the oven, and looking relieved when Rey nodded.

“Perfect, everything else is easy” he said, squeezing her waist as he moved around her and started to clear things off the cluttered counter.

“Here” he said, a moment later, passing her a glass of white wine, cool and welcome in her hand.

“Go speak to Jack for a bit” he said, and she bit her lip hesitantly.

“I still have to –“ she started, and jumped when Ben’s hand descended lightly on her bottom, making her jump.

“Go and sit with Jack, take him a drink. It's not a request” he said lowly, in that commanding tone she was coming to love so much. She smiled up at him, and then, rising to her toes, pressed a kiss on his cheek.

“Who am I to disregard an order?” she murmured, and grabbed a drink for Jack, before escaping gratefully to the sitting room, sinking into the large couch, as Jack surfed the channels for the pregame coverage.

They chatted and watched the TV, Jack with attention, Rey absently as she kept catching glimpses of Ben from the corner of her eye. He was moving about the kitchen with purpose. Checking the turkey and washing vegetables, peeling and slicing and sauteeing with ease. He had turned the radio on, and even gone as far as to tie a black apron over his clothes. He looked light hearted for once, and she couldn’t quite tear her eyes away. She took a mental picture, and labelled it Domestic Ben, just for her.

She glanced at the clock, and stood, taking her wine with her to their room. Her guests would be arriving soon, and she didn’t want any evidence left of her culinary incompetence.

In the shower, indulging in a hot and long one, seeing as Ben was taking care of the food side now, a huge weight lifted off her shoulders, she realised gratefully.

There was a growing awareness in Rey of how very appreciative she was of Ben doing every day things for her. She realised that she enjoyed the way he was in public with her, perhaps a combination of being older and his commanding presence, and upbringing, despite it’s obvious failings, had still developed in Ben the confidence of money, education and breeding, and it shouldn’t turn her on as much as it did. The way he commands things, organises things, gets respect and deferential treatment from people, it was impossible to deny that it was sexy. Ordering in a restaurant, hailing a cab, when she heard him on work calls, and even now, moving around the kitchen with confidence.

Suddenly, she didn’t feel like she is constantly running up hills all day, every day, and she realised in an honest moment, that she had spent her life taking care of other people, and it feels good to have someone take care of her, anticipate her needs, consider her in their future. She never thought she would find a part of herself that enjoyed that, and is surprised now to discover it, though she has an inkling that it is not a general thing, it is very specifically related to this man.
She quite likes Ben taking care of her.

As she got out and wrapped a towel around her, squeezing her hair over the side of the shower, she glanced out the ajar bathroom door, and saw Ben, taking a long swallow of whiskey from the glass in his hand. In all the excitement of cooking and seeing Jack, tidying up the apartment and feeling pride in the thought of her friends seeing her place with Ben, she had forgotten that it wasn’t easy for Ben to see his mother.

“Everything ok? I can come help” she said, combing her damp hair straight.

“Tell me again which of your friends are coming” Ben said, slowly turning to face her from his study of the view outside.

“Finn and Poe” Rey supplied, and felt her cheeks heat a little as Ben gave her a long, measured look.

“What?” she asked after a moment, all too aware of Ben intuitiveness and the way he was watching her closely.

“Poe is the dark haired one, correct?” he asked, and Rey nodded mutely.

“You’ve met Finn before, when I was ill”

“But I’ve never been introduced to Poe”

“Well, there’s not really been a chance… the other night I guess” she offered lamely, shifting from foot to foot. She wasn’t exactly sure why she felt guilty under his frank stare, but it was undeniable.

“What is it you’re asking, Ben, just spit it out” she said after a moment, folding her arms across her towelled chest.

“Do you have a history with him? The way he looks at you suggests that you do” he said shortly, setting his glass down and approaching her. She backtracked into the bathroom, turning to the mirror to set her comb down, but really avoiding his eye.

“Not really… you know I don’t have a proper history with anyone, except you” she said, catching his eye in the mirror, seeing him follow her right into the room, and shut the door behind him.

“A history doesn’t have to have been physical to have meant something” he said quietly, and she sighed, turning around and leaning against the sink, resolved to having the conversation.

“Fine. Yes, there was something between us. We tried, I tried. I thought he would be a wonderful and caring boyfriend, and I hoped that spending time with him would help me to forget… you. It didn’t though, and I felt shitty about leading him on. I still do.”

“So, he liked you, and probably still does” Ben surmised, and Rey let out a laugh.

“Well, if you want to reduce a complicated relationship to a childlike interpretation—“ she broke off as she saw Ben let out a heavy breath, leaning back against the door, his face resigned. She suddenly felt horrible. Today would be hard enough for him, seeing his mother, without an extra person to feel awkward in front of.

She approached him slowly, and then, reached out and gripped his hands by his sides.
“I kind of feel like jealousy is so completely ridiculous between us, after… everything. It’s such a non-issue, I wish you wouldn’t torment yourself with it” she said, and then tipped his chin up, so his eyes were forced to meet hers.

“I’ve only loved one man, and that’s basically the plan…”

“For?” Ben asked suddenly.

“For what?”

“That’s the plan… for how long?” he murmured, winding strands of her wet hair through his fingers.

“As long as he’ll have me” she replied, and Ben’s smile sprang up, wide and whole, stealing her breath for moment. She felt a surge of love for him, this perfectly incomplete man before her.

“You know, now that I have you here, I was thinking how I could show my appreciation of your culinary skills, which I fully plan to take credit for, just so you know” she murmured, her wicked line of thinking showing on her face, as Ben’s eyes narrowed at her hands, which were steadily moving down his chest to his belt buckle.

“And what exactly did you have in mind?” he said, ending in a small groan as she succeeded in opening the belt and reaching inside, brushing him with her fingertips, before sinking to her knees. Ben was silent, and she looked up to see a curious and hungry look on his face. She tentatively pulled his fly open wider, and her hands moved to the band of his underwear, all the while Ben watched her intensely. This was another first for her, it seemed all her firsts were destined to be with this man, and that suited her fine. She brushed her nose lightly against his underwear and the hardness underneath, mirroring some of the moves he used on her, her nose filling with the smell of him, clean and masculine and Ben. She smiled up at him.

“Is this ok?” she murmured, arching an eyebrow.

“Sweetheart, you’re killing me” he muttered, bringing a hand to her head and running his fingers through her hair.

“Meaning?” she teased, as she flicked her tongue out to trace the smattering of hair descending from his belly button under his shorts.

“If you stop I’ll die” he said, his voice rough as she pulled open the top of his boxers and his straining length jumped free, reaching up his stomach, and Rey giggled, before leaning in to press a kiss on the head.

“Such enthusiasm” she breathed as she brought her hands up to wrap her fingers around him. Ben seemed to be fading away into another world, as she continued her amateur explorations, and heard the tell-tale sound of someone knocking lightly on the bedroom door. She pulled back and quickly stood, as Ben’s eyes shot open and he looked desperately at her.

“Don’t die, but I think everyone’s here” she said, evading his mouth as he leant forward to capture her lips.

“Don’t care” he murmured as his hands landed on her hips.

“Everyone… including your mother” she said, and felt him freeze, before letting out a long breath. He rested his forehead against hers a long moment, before straightening up and tucking himself in, his face pained, as Rey jumped into action, pulling on the underwear she’d left on the back of the
door and flipping her hair over, hairdryer in hand.

Ben lingered, watching her, still looking put out and frustrated.

“Come on, no one ever died of blue balls” she chirped cheerfully, as he scowled at her.

“Well, I might be the first.” He muttered darkly.

“I have to say Rey, your cooking has really come on” Poe said, as he dug into his mashed potatoes with gusto. Finn grunted agreement, and Rey slid a glance at Leia, suddenly mortified over her friends table manners. She had become aware of her uncouth eating behaviours early on, eating with Ben as teenagers, but she had only really improved enough to get by without disgusting people. Now, back in Ben’s life, and suddenly sitting across the table from Leia Organa-Solo, she desperately wished she’d paid more attention.

Jack was clearly having no such worries, as he proceeded to cut everything on his plate into bite sized pieces, lay his knife down, and eat the rest of his meal with just a fork. Rey dragged her eyes away from the car crash that was downtown meeting upper West side around the dinner table, and focused on the conversation.

“It sounds really interesting, I have to admit” Finn was saying to Leia, before glancing Rey’s way.

“Though, it’s really Rey that’s into the Arts, I bet you’d love an opportunity to go abroad and work” Finn was saying blithely, unaware of how Ben’s hands tightened on his at his words.

“Hmm” Rey hummed noncommittally, and found Leia’s eyes on her. She gave the older woman a warm smile, and continued to eat carefully.

“The Organa-Solo foundation does good work, we’ve covered some of their events. Don’t you want to get in on that? Get on the right side?” Poe said with a joking smile, freezing on his face as Ben turned an artic expression on him and Leia tensed visibly.

“Excuse me?” Ben asked, and Rey immediately reached out for Ben’s hand, which was curled into a fist on the table. Poe looked back and forth at the faces around the table, suddenly realising maybe he had said something sensitive.

“I just mean, working for an altruistic cause, helping people, it’s got to win out over…. Whatever it is that First Order Finance does” Poe trailed off, a small tinge of red lighting up his cheeks. Ben watched him with a hard expression.

“Is being a journalist for a tabloid helping people?” he asked, and Leia shot him a look.

“Ben, don’t” she warned, and that only served to make him seem more tense if it was possible. Rey dug her fingers into Ben’s fist, sinking her nails in, willing him with her eyes to look her way and stop glaring at Poe.

“Ben” she whispered, as Jack and Finn, watching the football in the background, starting shouting
about the score, breaking the tension. He finally looked at her, seeming to drag his eyes from Poe at great personal cost. Rey smiled at him, a little, teasing smile, and relaxed her death grip on his fist.

“Relax…” she reminded him, and then picked his entire, clenched fist up off the table, and pressed a soft kiss to the back of his hand. After a moment, Ben’s hands curled around hers, and continued to hold it as they went back to their meals.

“So, tell me about your latest project” Leia prompted, and Rey smiled gratefully at her, before launching into a private townhouse that she was helping Jessika with.

After dinner, Rey was rinsing dishes as Ben stacked them in the dishwasher beside her, his eyes on the living room, where Poe and Finn were watching the end of the game, and Leia and Jack were standing at the window, admiring the view. Suddenly, Leia threw her head back and laughed, seeming like a carefree girl for a moment, and Ben stilled at the action, his dark eyes capturing the softened lines of his mother’s face, and the sound of her happiness.

“Rey! Should we go out for a walk? Work off some of this food?” Finn called, as he and Poe made moves to grab their coats.

“How does my mother know Jack?” Ben asked suddenly from beside her, and she turned to see he had now braced his hands on the countertop and was watching his mother again, with an intent look.

“Erm, I’m not sure” Rey hedged, suddenly afraid of the territory Ben was heading into. She knew she couldn’t keep Leia’s secret forever, she wasn’t even sure that Leia wanted it to be a secret, but it seemed like something she should tell Ben herself. Rey still hadn’t thought of a way to make that happen, and now, as Ben turned his granite expression to hers, she realised she had run out of time.

“Rey… what are you hiding from me?”

“Me?” she practically squeaked, and flushed red in the aftermath of her guilty tone. Ben turned to her, and gently reached out for her arm, pulling her closer to him, his eyes capturing every micro expression flying across her face.

“Rey, sweetheart… How does my mother know Jack so well? And why was your condition that I re-establish my relationship with her?” he said lowly, and Rey couldn’t meet that searing gaze, couldn’t hide the omission in her mind while he looked inside her, sure he’d find it.

And then, she saw when Ben came to his own, conclusion, slowly creeping over him all afternoon, when Leia ate sparingly, and disappeared frequently to the bathroom, toting a heavy bag and stuck to only water. When she nursed her temples, as though a tremendous headache was plaguing her, but she didn’t want to say. In that moment, when he allowed himself to realise, Rey saw all light and hope go out in Ben’s eyes for a moment, and he looked truly desolate.

“I am so so sorry” she whispered to him, as he pulled away from her, folding into himself. He
walked to the far side of the kitchen and turned the tap on, holding a plate in his hand, his eyes fixed outside the window, the plate hanging uselessly at his side, while the water gushed.

Behind him, she saw Finn and Poe approaching her, and spoke in a low voice.

“I’m coming, let’s go for a walk, and take Jack” she said, shimmying into her coat and snagging her uncle’s arm as he passed by to put a cup on the counter. Once she had succeeded in bundling them out the door, she saw Leia had realised there was something wrong, and was sitting on the couch, watching her son fall apart silently.

Rey hesitated behind his broad back, before slipping her arms around his waist and pressing a kiss against the wide expanse.

“Ben, I’m going to leave you two alone for a bit, to talk” she said, and saw his hands tremor as he lifted the plate finally, and set it on the counter, turning the water off as he did.

“If you don’t want me to go, that’s fine, I’ll stay. But I think you should speak to her, one to one.” She said softly, and jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Leia had appeared, her face tired.

“It’s ok, Rey. You go for your walk” she said, patting her on the shoulder.

“I’m going to go then, ok? And I’ll be home soon, less than an hour” Rey said, waiting for Ben to give her sign that he wanted her to stay. He turned his profile to her, just barely, and inclined his head an inch. She let out a breath she hadn’t realised she had been holding, and stepped away, making for the door.

As she was about to pull it closed, she looked back and saw Leia had now moved her soft, frail touch to Ben, who stood above her like a giant, full of energy and vitality, next to a fading star. As Rey pulled the door closed, she saw Ben turn to his mother fully, and Leia’s hand rise toward his face, and then she stopped looking. It was private and personal and she felt like an intruder. She turned to the lift, her heart still inside the apartment, as she fretted how Ben was taking the news, and then realising that his mother was there with him, for the first time in forever. He wasn’t alone, and with that realisation, she found the strength to leave.

“What’s the story with that guy?” Poe asked lightly as they walked the quiet park paths in the fading light, a light dusting of snow and ice tracking their footsteps.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… he’s a bit angry, isn’t he?” Poe said, and she could hear all the things he wanted to say that he was holding back. She crossed her arms over her chest, avoiding his gaze.

“Not always, the stuff with his mom and the foundation, it’s a bit of a sore subject”

“Yeah, but why? It’s a dream job, a great chance to make a difference-“

“It’s between them” she cut in, hoping to cut him off. They walked a little further, crossing a little drawbridge over water, and Poe stopped, leaning on the rail, and looked at the view.
“It’s as pretty as a picture” Rey murmured, looking up at the swirling snow, laughing as it landed on her eyelashes.

“Yes, it is” Poe murmured, and she realised he was looking at her, his eyes warm on her face. She turned back to the view and waited, recognising that he was building up saying something.

“Are you happy Rey?”

“Of course, I’m always happy” she deflected, unsure why she really wanted to avoid the whole subject with Poe.

“That’s not true, don’t forget, I know you, Rey… maybe not as well as Solo there, but I do know you”

There was a wounded note to his voice, and it tugged at her. She turned and gave him a small smile.

“I know, I’m sorry. I am happy, Ben makes me happy” she said, the words sounding stark and heavy in the air, as Poe inspected them, and seemed to find her conviction unconvincing.

“Except when he makes you sad? Except when you have to talk him down from erupting at Thanksgiving dinner over a throw away comment, next to his mother… that’s not normal, Rey” Poe was saying, and Rey turned her numbing face away from him.

“You don’t know him”

“I doubt anyone really knows him” Poe muttered and Rey shook her head.

“No, that’s not true. I know him. I really know him Poe.” She said.

“We have barely seen you since summer”

“I’ve been busy… I’ll be better, I promise”

“If he lets you?” Poe said, and Rey felt her patience start to fray, and reminded herself that this was her friend, and he was worried about her.

“Ben doesn’t let me do anything – it’s not like that. Sometimes he needs me, that’s all, and I can’t leave him alone when he does”

“That sounds sweet Rey, it sounds selfless and compassionate, and totally Reyish. But, it also doesn’t sound healthy” Poe remarked after a long pause, she Rey avoided his gaze and bit her tongue. And what could she even say? That she knew it wasn’t, but it was something she was trying, something she had decided to do, purposefully accepting the unusualness of it. Poe wouldn’t understand something like that, she knew it beyond a doubt.

“You deserve someone who makes you a part of the world, not hides you away from it. What about your work?”

“He supports my work”

“For now”

“No, not just for now, always” Rey snapped, and glanced angrily at Poe, though she wasn’t sure if she was angry at him, or angry for him revealing all her desperate fears.
“I don’t want to upset you, I’ve just seen it before. It starts with distancing you from friends, and then work and then going out without him, and suddenly, you only exist in his shadow.”

“That will never happen to me, Poe, you know me. I wouldn’t let it” she said with conviction, finding that she was absolutely sure of it. She had decided to help Ben, if she could, but she wouldn’t be a martyr to the cause. Ben, in his heart wouldn’t ever want that.

“You don’t know him.” She said, with finality and turned to go back to Jack and Finn, who were a little ways off, talking animatedly.

“No, that’s true. But I know you, and I care about you… I just want you to be happy, and be with someone who appreciates you”

“Like you?” she challenged, daring him to reveal that something personal was driving his interrogation.

“No not like me, I know that’s over. I worry about you, as a friend, and I’m not the only one.” He said, turning with her and joining her as they walked down the other side of the bridge.

Rey forced a smile as Jack looked at her in askance, and tried to push Poe’s words to the back of her mind.

Chapter End Notes

Hello all!! I hope everyone is having a nice holiday and lots of choco eggs. I’m on my third Creme egg of the day and it's marvellous.

A nice little update for you all, and thank you so much for the beautiful response to my previous chapter. You guys make me feel so supported and inspired. Thank you xxx

We might be starting to head into dark territory, so buddy up and don’t lose each other! Into the darkness we go -

p.s also this song is not my usual, but it was on the radio when I was writing the last scene and it totally made me think of Rey and Poe)))

Also!! Forgot to say - shamless plug - I wrote another little story - just a short one, as stress relief, called "Bang Bang, He Shot Me Down" which I'll be putting up when I get a minute if you fancy checking it out - totally unrelated to this story, but just for kicks, when I heard the song and had a little plot bunny xx
“Miss! Can I speak to you?”

“What’s up Layla?” Rey asked, pulling a long-sleeved hoodie on over her thin vest. While training was warm enough, the weather had changed for good, and it was full on Winter. She waved to the girls, departing the gym, and turned her attention to one of her most outspoken students.

“I was just thinking… you know, what we were talking about last week. Emanci- something”

“Emancipation?” Rey asked, sitting on a bench and inviting Layla to join her.

“Who are you asking for?” Rey said, and then bit her tongue as Layla’s face closed up.

“It doesn’t matter. What did you want to know about it?”

“How does it work? Like, how fast can it happen?” Layla asked, wrapping her arms around her middle, and perching on the very edge of the bench.

“It depends on the case, if you want, we can research it more together, or I can bring some things for you to read”
“I couldn’t have them at home-“ Layla interrupted, looking panicked for a second.

“Hey!” a loud shout sent them both looking to the doorway and a man standing in it. He wasn’t tall, but he had an aggressive set to his shoulders that immediately made Rey nervous. She stood slowly, already taking a step toward the training staff, on the floor nearby.

“Can I help you?”

“Dad?? Why are you here? I’m just coming” Layla huffed, standing quickly and going to the man’s side, pulling his arm toward the door, but he resisted the movement, instead standing and staring at Rey.

“I need to speak to your teacher, go wait outside” the man said, and Layla looked worriedly at Rey. Rey forced a calm expression to her face.

“It’s fine, Layla, we’ll just be a minute. You can come back and check on us, if we are longer” Rey said, and Layla nodded, indicating that she had understood her. She left, leaving the door open in her wake, Rey was relieved to see. She turned to the side, and picked up the staffs, on the pretence of packing her bag.

“What can I help you with, sir?” She asked, watching him carefully in the mirrored wall beside them. His fists bunched and loosened, bunched and loosened, before he brought himself to talk.

“I don’t want Layla coming here anymore, filling her head with nonsense”

“It’s a self-defence class, I just want to girls to be prepared to protect themselves, if they should ever need it.”

“What would someone like you know about self-defence?” he sneered, and Rey levelled a long look at him, before shrugging.

“Enough.”

“The martial arts are fine, it’s the other stuff – filling her mind with feminist crap, about college and jobs and moving out – she’s not going anywhere” he finished with a growl.

“All the girls talk to each other, they have big dreams, they’re teenagers”

“Stop misunderstanding me. Stop telling my daughter that she would be better off and safer outside my house. She’s my daughter and I take care of her, and decide what’s best for her. She’s not going anywhere” he said, with finality, and Rey’s grip tightened on the staff.

“It’s a voluntary group. I can’t refuse anyone entry.”

“If she comes here again – you won’t like what happens” the man said, and Rey kept her face neutral.

“Is that a threat?”

“No, just think of it as neighbourly advice.”

Rey saw Layla come back to the door, the girl’s face whiter than she’d ever seen it, afraid, looking between her teacher and her father.

“It’s fine Layla, we’re finished.” Rey reassured her, picking up her bags, the staff still looped in her arm, ready to be used, if needed.
“I’ll see you soon?” Layla asked in a small voice as her father’s hand clamped onto her arm, and tugged her away, out the building and down the sidewalk, and Rey couldn’t do anything but watch.

“Have you seen the report I left on your desk?” Hux’s voice, as always, grated on Ben’s nerves. He looked up irritably.

“I will when I get around to it” he said, and focused back on the email he was reading. After a long moment, he looked up, seeing Hux still lingering in the doorway.

“Can I help you with something, Armitage?” he said, his voice cold.

“Snoke wants to talk to you about something” the red-haired man said slowly, and Ben gestured for him to continue.

“When?” and Hux shrugged, a movement so casual and insolent, it shocked Ben.

“I heard about your mother.” Hux said, and Ben’s glare turned glacial.

“And?” Ben prompted, sure that Hux wasn’t about to offer some platitude, given their relationship. He’d be more likely to goad him. But Hux did neither, his eyes fixed on a point on the wall, his pale throat flushing slightly, he spoke quietly.

“I was wondering what you were thinking of doing with her foundation” he said.

“Why, looking for a new job?” Ben asked harshly, while watching Hux’s strange behaviour closely.

“Hardly. But it’s something to think about. It has a lot of… projects going on, someone has to manage them. Take guardianship” Hux said, finally meeting Ben’s eyes. His look was oddly intent, and Ben found himself feeling like he was missing something important here. But with a head chocked full of his mother’s illness and Holdo’s requests for secret company information, he had no room for Hux’s mysterious messages.

“Well, thankfully, my mother isn’t dead yet.” He said dryly.

“And anyway, I don’t see why she would leave anything to me, we are hardly close” he finished, feeling genuine curiosity pricking him. What would Leia do with the foundation, her life’s work, if it came down to it.

“Perhaps that’s for the best” Hux said, looking relieved for a moment, silencing Ben completely, as he turned and left.
“Was it everything you imagined?” Rose said in Rey’s ear, as she tried to juggle the phone, a long garment bag and call the lift at the same time.

“That and worse” Rey grumbled as she finally managed to get in and press the button for the top floor.

“You know, I have it on good authority some people actually enjoy getting pampered, hair done, nails…”

“Well, I don’t know about them, but that’s it for me. Never again” Rey promised. She caught sight of herself in the mirrored door, and had to concede that though she may have hated the whole afternoon, the professionals had done their jobs well. Under Leia’s guidance, her hair had been coaxed into an elaborate style, and her make up, far more than she’d ever worn before, had made her eyes look huge and her lips bee stung. She wriggled her eyebrows, seeing if her face would actually crack open if she did, revealing plain old Rey underneath, but it stayed put.

“How was it with Ben’s mom? First alone time?” Rose asked.

“It was nice, actually, she offered me a job” Rey said, typing the code into the apartment door and going in, thankfully dropping the heavy garment bag over the back of the couch and sitting down, careful not to muss her hair.

“What? You’re joking! At her foundation?”

“Sort of… it sounds crazy but… it’s in Italy, well, I mean, part of it would be” Rey said, her mind drifting back to the wine filled lunch before the beauticians.

“Rey, I’ve seen your work, you’re very talented, and I want to do something to help you reach it, and I confess, to benefit from it, for our foundation” Rey had watched her, as she speared a piece of chicken with her fork, waiting to see where she was going with this, and trying not to imagine Ben’s face.

“Have you heard of Art Therapy?”

“Of course, it’s great… I’ve used it myself I guess, though I never really thought of it like that. I just knew painting made me feel better” Leia squeezed her hand lightly, and nodded, as though confirming something for herself.

“I think you would be an ideal person to spear head a new outreach program we are starting, working with teens in certain areas of the city, mentoring them, helping them work through their
problems, through art. I couldn’t think of a better teacher” Leia said, and Rey stared at her stunned. It wasn’t something she had ever thought of herself doing, though, she was seriously attached to her self-defence classes, so maybe Leia saw something in Rey that she couldn’t see herself.

“Now, I know what Ben would say, before you tell me. He would protest that you’re an artist, and that you need time to develop that, and I agree of course. However, I see something in you, that enjoys nurturing, that is inspired by the children you work with. If I could guarantee that this position would be part time at most, with an assistant to help, your choice, your hire, though I do think your friend, Finn, would be someone the students would really respond to, would you consider it?” Rey bit her lip, trying to think rationally and not just jump of something that made her heart race with excitement.

“That isn’t the only thing Ben would say” she said at length, and she saw Leia’s face fall a little.

“I know. He wouldn’t want us working together, I suppose. Or at least he’d be cautious. Worried that I was inserting myself into your lives, into his life… through you. I know” Leia said, and fiddling with her watch, as Rey took a sip of wine, and wondered how she could argue against Leia’s on the nose predication.

“And how could I argue? Because here is nothing I’d like more. I’d like to become woven into the fabric of my son’s life, as he falls in love with a wonderful woman, starts a family with her. I would like to be there, to see Ben smile again.”

Rey felt a tear fall on her cheek, at the tremulous expression on Leia’s face.

“So much time wasted, so much life lost… I don’t have any more time to wait” she said, and Rey almost lost it. She wiped away her tears to reach out to take Leia’s hands in her own.

“You’ll have plenty of time” Rey said, though she knew it was a promise that she couldn’t make. Leia took a deep breath, her own brown eyes clouded with tears.

“Dear me, a cocktail lunch before a Christmas Gala is not supposed to be quite so emotional” Leia said with a laugh, and Rey joined in, though the tremendous sadness that she had seen on Leia’s face was seared into her heart.

“Now, down to the other detail that Ben will not like, which is that of the training. My brother is the one who is developing the program initially”

“Your brother? Ben has an uncle?”

“Yes, indeed. A rather famous one at that, though I am not surprised he hasn’t mentioned it to you” Leia said.

“They don’t get on?”

“If you had though Ben and I’s relationship was strained, it is nothing compared to the animosity between him and Luke”

“Luke-“

“Luke Skywalker” Leia finished, and Rey stared at her.

“Luke Skywalker, the artist?”
“The very same. I fear I might have gotten Ben in trouble for hiding his famous, painter uncle” Leia said with chuckle as Rey tried to process the news. Ben’s art came back to her, proficient even as a teen, though full of his hurt and anger, paintings of a desolate soul.

“Anyway, working with Luke would upset Ben?”

“Undoubtedly, but, it could force a reconciliation, perhaps, though I know I am selfish for wishing that. The other thing is location. Luke lives in Italy and that is where the training would take place”

“Ben’s Italian…”

“Learned from living there for long summers when he was younger. He loved it over there, though I am sure he hasn’t been for a long time, maybe since the last time he saw Luke”

Rey pushed back from the table and let out a long breath at all the news, thing after thing, she felt like the ground had shaken beneath her.

“So, here’s my offer” Leia said, and Rey glimpsed a hint of the woman who was able to get the largest donations for her causes, the same woman who had been respected in politics years before.

“Training with Luke in Italy, room and board covered. In addition to the therapy training, the opportunity to learn from Luke. It has been a long time since he mentored a student. The last was Ben. I believe he would be inspired by your work Rey, and want to work with you. Discover Italy, museums and art, culture… everything, as my guest. Return after the training period and head up out new program, working part time to bring a little light into neighbourhoods like yours, and paint the rest of the time.”

“Ben-“

“Can visit, and I hope he does, lays the past to rest with his uncle. A year would pass soon enough, and then, you’ll be back by his side, after seeing the world, learning from a master” Leia finished.

“A year” Rey breathed, scarcely about to consider the implications of what Leia was offering.

“Jack-“

“Is in remission and getting stronger every day. He’ll visit, stay at the institute if he wants, hell, he can stay the whole time. I’ll personally bring him to visit.” She said, and Rey let a little, hiccupping laugh at her enthusiasm.

“What do you think? And I know you can’t give me an answer right now, but, first impressions?” Leia asked, her keen eyes taking in Rey’s every expression.

“It sounds wonderful, a dream come true… it’s just…” Rey trailed off.

“Ben” Leia supplied, and Rey nodded slowly, finally finding someone she could talk about Ben to, someone who knew him.

“Ben. It would break his heart, and I can’t do that to him. Nothing I want is more important than being there for Ben” she confessed, and hated how weak the words made her sound, but she knew her own conviction, what she had agreed and decided on, and it wasn’t something lightly pushed aside.

“Oh Rey, as his mother, my heart can rest knowing that Ben has someone who loves him so.
However, as a woman, I know… love isn’t always enough, not when the years pass and all the opportunities and hope of youth falls away, and you are left, two people who carry resentments, becoming more and more bitter every day. When that happens, the warm memory of a great love is a cold comfort. I don’t just want Ben to happy now, I want him to be happy, for both of you to be happy later too and that’s why I am suggesting this. Ben has always feared losing what he loves, and life has repaid that fear by making it happen over and over again. If he’s not careful, he’ll crush you to him too tightly, he’ll hold on too hard, and he’ll break it – he’ll break your love for him” Leia said, checking her watch and signalling for the check.

“I can’t leave him alone right now – Snoke… he’s still so tied to… that world” Rey said quietly, invoking the name that was sure to hurt Leia, regretfully. Leia flinched at the sound, but her face remained soft.

“You can’t defeat Snoke for Ben, you can’t free him from those invisible bonds of a lifetime of suffering and dependence. Only he can do that. He just has to want to enough, to outweigh his fear. And I think now, he does”

“He does?” Rey asked uncertainly.

“He does, now he has something to lose”

Rey looked hopelessly at her hands. Leia’s words were genuine, and Rey felt instinctively that the courage of youth, to throw herself at Ben’s problems, might be viewed differently through the benefit of age. She didn’t know if Ben could break her love for him, it seemed impossible.

“Come, let’s think about the Gala now, and you think it over. Only know, I would never suggest something I didn’t think was in Ben’s best interests long term.”

“Wow, that’s a lot” Rose breathed over the phone, as Rey told her an abridged version. She hadn’t really told Rose about Ben’s issues but her intuitive friend seemed to understand a lot more than Rey had ever said.

“Would you want to do it?”

“God, imagine… Jack would be freaked out, he’s never been out the country, and my classes at the community centre, I couldn’t just leave the girls like that, Pava Interiors and-“

“Rey! I said would you want to do it… if nothing else was an issue?” Rose asked and Rey felt a smile spring to her lips immediately.

“Yes, hell yes” she responded.

“I’m so happy for you, and I am not just saying that because there is the chance of a trip to Italy in it for vacation and maybe even a job for my layabout boyfriend” Rose said with a smile in her voice.

“Well, it’s academic right now anyway, I doubt it would all happen” Rey said, slowly, seeing the door the apartment open and Ben come in, looking tired and little worse for wear. It was his last day of work before Christmas holiday, and she couldn’t wait.

“I have to go Rose, I’ll see you later, at the gala?” They hung up, and Ben was taking his coat off,
and closing the distance between them with large steps. He leant down, his hands moving for her face, as Rey scooted backwards and almost fell off the cushion. He stilled, hands frozen in the air, reaching for her.

“Don’t! This took ages and I am not seeing your mother in a couple of hours with sex head.”

“Sex head, that’s a new one. Hello” he said, sitting on the back of the couch and smiling at her.

“Hi” she responded, curling her arms around her knees and resting her chin atop her knees carefully.

“Who was making you smile like that?” he asked, tracing a hand down her arm, and lacing his fingers through hers.

“Just Rose.” She deferred, hoping he wasn’t going to ask her what they were talking about.

“You look stunning, by the way” he murmured, as he raised her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss along her knuckles, letting his teeth gently graze the skin there, his tongue following along, tracing an indecent, slow circle on her wrist. Rey narrowed her eyes at him, pulling her hand out his grasp.

“Thank you, and don’t even try it. I am not seductable right now”

“You do know that sounds like a challenge?” he said, his voice dropping lower, his dark eyes flashed at her.

“Don’t you want to know how your mother is?” she asked desperately, seeing his wicked intent as he moved around the other side of the couch, and gentle pushed her backwards.

“Nice try. We’ve already spoken” he said, not missing a beat as he reached for the waist band on her jeans, unsnapping the button and dragging them down over her hips, taking her knickers with it.

“Ben” she gasped as the answering desire to his rose to meet him, inside her. He looked up from his perusal of her naked lower half, and suddenly flipped her over, so she was face down, her body supported on her elbows, head and shoulders in the air, hair perfectly safe. He then settled himself on the floor and pulled her hips toward the edge of the couch, his lips pressing kisses into the back of her thighs. She felt his tongue, edging toward the place already burning for him.

"My hair-" she gasped, her words falling away.

“Better hold still then”
The dress Leia had given Rey was vintage couture, and she had stared at it for about 30 minutes, before Ben had come looking for her. She had almost been afraid to touch this piece of material, worth more than 2 months of rent. It was pale, blush pink, so pale it was almost white. It was floor length, and now, seeing all the beading and net, lace and it’s many, many layers, she understood why it had been so heavy. Ben had helped her put it on, laying a cloth over her head before helping to lift the huge thing, skirts first, over her head. She had thought you would step into it, but the bodice was so fitted and tight, there was no way it was going over her hips.

As Ben tugged it carefully over her shoulders, her make up kept intact by the cloth on her face, she thought what a picture they made. When he had it down to her waist, she had whisked off the cloth and tried to twist around and see what he was doing, only hearing a lot of swearing about pearl buttons and large fingers. Eventually, he grunted that it was finished, and Rey had turned around, and smiled hesitantly at him.

“Well?” she’d asked as he had simply stared at her. He was a sight himself, dressed in a tux, his long hair swept back from his aristocratic forehead. He swallowed visibly, and nodded to himself. The tension heightened between them, as they stared at each other, and Rey could see his worship in his eyes. It did funny things to her stomach, to be wanted like that, to be longed for.

“You’ll do” he said, at last, and dodged her hand as it reached out to smack him in retaliation, catching her arm and stepping closer to her. He trapped that one hand against his chest, his other hand going to her waist, and swayed them back and forth a little, in time to music only he could hear, and Rey relaxed into his arms.

“Will you save me a dance?” he asked at length.

“Always” she responded, as he slowly spun her, and she cautiously went under his arm, seeing if she was about to fall flat on her face in a puff of tulle.

“My father was a great dancer.” He said suddenly.

“Really?”

“Really. A great dancer and a scoundrel. My mother always called him one, but always with affection. I remember, once, when I was young, I must have been really young, because in the memory, they… they weren’t fighting” Ben said slowly, and Rey waited patiently, knowing it was hard for him to talk about his past, and his father most of all.

“I sat on the stairs, I was going to come and ask to get a glass of milk, but then I saw, them both sitting in front of the fire, in that same sitting room… you know the one” he said with a quick grin down at her.

“A song came on, they must have been listening to a record, an old Jimmy Fontana – Il Mondo, it was called. It came on, and my father, always the smoothest man I’ve ever seen in action, turned to my mother and said, “Are you dancing?” and she smiled back, like it was an old joke between them, and I suddenly realised, in that moment, that my parents had this whole relationship separate from me. I know all kids go through that, but that was my moment. She said “Are you asking?” and I suddenly saw this whole life they’d had lived before me, meeting and falling in love, living together, getting married. I was just a short part of their lives, in the scheme of things, and they were all of mine, and I was happy. I was happy that they loved each other like that.”
“What did your father say?”

“He said ‘Always’.

“Rey, I gotta say, this is an excellent spread. Solo is a keeper, for the catering alone” Finn enthused as he snagged another canopy from a passing waiter. The ballroom of the Organa-Solo foundation gala was filled to the brim with important guests, people dressed to the nines, and Rey had been glad to see that she hadn’t been overdressed after all.

“Though I have to say, then you and Ben walked in here, I kind of thought maybe this was like a secret wedding or something” Finn continued, downing a hearty swallow of champagne from his float, before fishing the strawberry out and popping it into his mouth. Rey gaped at him.

“What?? Have you seen your dress, you look like a bride, kind of and then Ben in the tux…” Finn waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Stop it” she said, distracting herself as she saw Rose approaching with Catherine. Back to visit over the Christmas holidays, Catherine was full of news about her new job, and the university town she was falling in love with upstate.

“It’s not a secret wedding” Finn said to his girlfriend around another mouthful of food. Rose rolled her eyes at him.

“No one thought that but you.” She told him before turning to Rey.

“I thought we could get a cocktail, just us girls, and catch up” Finn raised his eyebrows at his diminutive partner, in mock hurt.

“What, and leave me all on my own-“ he trailed off, his eyes following after a waiter walking past with a new food tray.

“He’s hopeless” Rose muttered as the girls made their way to the bar, which was quite quiet. With as much free food and alcohol flowing, it wasn’t surprising people weren’t feeling the need to buy their own drinks. She knew that Leia personally paid for everything for the Christmas gala, a thank you to the sponsors who supported them year round, though, she had noticed a silent auction and a few other fundraising items near the door, for those so inclined.

They sat at the elegant bar, all gold and crystal reflecting the low, sparkling lights of the ball room.
“So, tell us all about it!” Rey squealed, to Catherine, once they were arranged, drinks in hand. Catherine looked really happy, she thought as she listened to her friend recount tales of her first few, confusing weeks, her campus explorations and other teachers.

“And are there any hot professors, there must be. My Social Anthropology professor was something else… I still remember him” Rose said dreamily. Catherine shook her head determinedly.

“Not really, I haven’t been looking to be honest” she said, biting her lip a little and glancing around the ballroom. Rey followed her eyes, and saw Ben had left his mother’s side and was talking to Hux, who looked surprising good in his own evening wear.

“Urgh, what’s he doing here?” she muttered.

“He’s a big donor, believe it or not” Catherine said, raising an eyebrow at Rey, who spluttered on her drink.

“I don’t believe it. He’s the worst. I can’t even believe that he would care for one minute about anyone except himself, especially kids from rough neighbourhoods” she said, thinking of Leia’s newest proposed project.

“Well, people can be surprising” Catherine said shortly, before turning to Rey, and nodding her head in Ben and Hux’s direction.

“He got me the job, did you know?”

“Who, Hux?” Rey asked shocked.

“No, Ben. Ben got me the job.” She said, and Rey took a long drink from her cocktail.

“Of course he did, because when can Ben Solo not try and meddle and manipulate things” she muttered, and Catherine laughed at her sour expression.

“I wasn’t upset, I was grateful. It was pretty obvious I have overstayed my welcome at First Order, I could have been out there, looking for a job, and instead, my dream one landed on my lap” Catherine said, and Rey thought now that job hunting might not have been the worst outcome that meddling with Snoke could have had.

“Well, as long as you’re happy, I’m happy”

“I am” Catherine confirmed.

“So, that’s the infamous Leia Organa-Solo” Rose said after a moment, as Leia moved past, her regal bearing drawing attention, despite her small stature.

“It is”

“She looks like someone to be reckoned with”

“Oh, she is” Rey said, and watched as Leia’s gaze was never far from Ben. Tall and commanding in his evening wear, towering above everyone else in the room, moving between people, shaking hands, making small talk, she could see Leia’s pride shining on her face. People were dancing on the tiled, middle part of the ball room, and she saw suddenly a wistful look on Leia’s face and felt a stab of sadness. Her forever partner was gone, and she could tell in that look that she thought of him every day, and all the dances they’d never share again.
“Rey, are you ok?” Rose asked, and Rey tried to shake off her melancholia.

“I’m fine, I just seemed to be tearing up all the time lately.”

“Maybe you’re pregnant” Rose suggested unhelpfully, taking another long sip of her Mojito.

“You can always tell how drunk Rose is by asking her a medical question. Her advice always gets proportionally less helpful and more outrageous in direct proportion to alcohol consumption.” Rey teased, making Rose snort some of her cocktail out her nose, setting Catherine off too.

I found a love for me
Darling just dive right in
And follow my lead

“Ahh! I love this song” Rose announced, leaping up.

“I’m going to find Finn and make him dance with me” she said, before disappearing into the crowd.

“Something we said?” Rey heard her favourite, low voice say behind her, and spun carefully around on the stool, weary of all her underskirts, her smile only barely faltering as she saw Ben, with Hux tagging along behind him.

“Catherine, this is a pleasant surprise” Hux said stiffly, avoiding Rey’s scathing glare.

“Merry Christmas, Armitage.” Catherine said, and Rey remembered that Catherine would have been in Hux’s year at school.

“Shall we?” Hux said and, in a movement smoother than she thought him capable of, swept Catherine onto the dancefloor, leaving Ben and Rey staring after them.

“Well, that was unexpected” Ben remarked, before turning back to Rey, his eyes crinkling at the corners with his smile. He extended his hand before him.

’Cause we were just kids when we fell in love

Not knowing what it was
I will not give you up this time

“Are you dancing?” he asked, and Rey felt her heart swell with emotion. She didn’t trust herself to speak, and cleared her throat, before managing.

“Are you asking?”

“Always” he confirmed, before his hand enclosed hers, and pulled her to the dancefloor, and drew her in close, the gentle circle he swung her out in made her dress flair around her ankles, and she felt like she was floating for a moment, and then she was sinking into his arms.
He held her upright, a strong and supportive frame, and she glanced up at him, effortless handsome in his tux, looking down at her with a half smile.

“Let me guess, formal dancing part of the Solo etiquette and manners training?”

“Why, of course.” He suddenly spun her under his arm, and she laughed as the room swirled in front of her eyes, before her back was meeting his chest, and then out again, back into the cage of his arms.

“And what did she envisage you would need this, clearly very rigorous, training for?”

“Why, there are many social occasions such a skill might be called upon.”

“Care to elaborate?” she said, her face the picture of mock seriousness.

“Why, of course. Social events and functions, such as fundraisers and charity balls, naturally.” His expression matching her own.

“Naturally. And you attend these events often?” she teased.

“Often enough” Ben said with a twinkle to his eye, as he moved her effortlessly around the ball room. They passed Leia as they went, and the look on her face moved Rey’s heart.

“You’ve made her happy” she murmured to Ben.

“We’ve made her happy” Ben corrected gently, before continuing, his eyes fixing back on Rey’s.

“Of course, there is the other, all too selfish reason for forcing dancing lessons on a reluctant 12 year-old.”

“And what would that be? Other than the entertainment value, of course”

“Well, how else could my mother be sure that the mother-son dance at the wedding would be to her satisfaction?” he said softly.

Rey felt her cheeks heat as she met his intense gaze, and couldn’t bear the scrutiny, wondering what Ben was thinking. She turned back to Leia, and saw a soft smile on the older woman’s face, as she laid a gentle hand on the empty chair beside her, perhaps imagining someone there, watching their son becoming the man they had always hoped he’d be.

_We are still kids, but we’re so in love_
_Fighting against all odds_
_I know we’ll be alright this time_

“We could give her that, you know.” Ben said softly. Rey looked back up at her dark knight, still so conflicted and broken inside, and only sure about one thing. Her.

“Before it’s too late?” Rey finished for him, already predicting his next words and Ben’s mouth quirked in a slight smile.

“It’s true Rey. Time is an issue”
“She wouldn’t want us to get married just so she could see it… She’d want us to be sure” Rey said, tucking her face against Ben’s chest.

“Of course, that’s why I suggested it” he finished, and Rey pressed her face further into his chest, feeling tears tug at her, again.

“Finn thought tonight was a secret wedding, he thought I was wearing a wedding dress” she said with a self-conscious laugh. Ben was quiet, as he twirled her around.

“I might have thought the same thing, just for a moment. It made me happier than I thought I could ever be again, Rey” he confessed quietly, his mouth, lightly brushing against her hair, and Rey squeezed her eyes closed, tucking those words away inside her heart, to be cherished.

“So, now we are getting married?” she said lightly, glad to hear her voice was steady.

“Aren’t we?”

"Maybe... one day"

"One day soon" Ben pressed.

Darling, just hold my hand
Be my girl, I'll be your man
I see my future in your eyes

Your father wasn’t the only scoundrel” she muttered without conviction. She didn’t want him to see how dear his words were to her, even in jest, the girl who was always afraid of being left, to have the man of her dreams offering her his entire future.

She wondered at her friend’s reaction, if she ever told them they were getting married. She knew disapproval would be the strongest one. They would wonder what the hurry was, why they couldn’t wait. They would worry Ben was rushing her, pressuring her, those trusted voices would whisper that maybe, he was trying to manipulate her, with Leia’s illness.

“Rey?” Ben asked softly, and she looked up at him, the song drawing to a close.

“Sorry, I’m a little hungry” she confessed, desperate to change the subject, and was relieved when he immediately started to lead her toward food, and away from the most highly emotional dance of her life. They passed by Leia, who was still watching them warmly.

“You should ask your mother to dance” Rey suggested. Ben looked over at her, his face clouding a little, before shaking his head.

“I want to, but I’m not there yet.” He said slowly, as they navigated toward the food.

“How about this, I’ll dance with her at our wedding” he offered, leaning in a stealing a swift kiss of her forehead as she rolled her eyes at him.

“Scoundrel”

“The scoundrel and the scavenger… it has as a certain ring to it.”
Ok, I admit it... the fluff and smaltz possessed me - it was the song and everything... so I just thought I'd go for it... these two deserve it... with what's coming (hides behind hands).

Again, song is not my usual, but seemed to fit Ben's perspective on Rey in this fic, by this point.
Give me the burden, give me the blame, I’ll shoulder the load, and I’ll swallow the shame

Chapter Notes

Devil's Backbone - The Civil Wars

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I have to postpone our meeting”

“What? Why?”

“I’m not sure, there is some discussion, further up the food chain, and I’m not important enough to know.”

Ben stared at the burner phone, a hundred feelings crashing through him at once, fear and suspicion, anger and relief.

“When will you know?”

“Soon, as soon as I know, you’ll know. Just keep your head down, business as usual” Holdo said, her voice efficient and reassuring over the line.

“Something’s wrong… Snoke-“

“We don’t know anything yet, let’s not jump to conclusions. Take care of yourself and Rey. I’ll be in touch”

Ben hung up the phone and stared at it, tiny in his large hand. He felt exposed, suddenly the investigation was involving others, people talking about him and the information he was funnelling out, deciding how to handle it, how to handle him. He wondered if they thought he was as much of a monster as he knew he was. He wondered what they would decide to do with him, after.

“You can’t think that making that face is going to save you, I have no sympathy! I won the bet, fair and square and anything you do now will just make you-“ Rey was saying, appearing by his side with skates in her hand, her precious face set in a determined expression, as she advanced on him, brandishing the rented torture devices.

He pulled her close, lifting her lightly and pressed a kiss to her lips, before lowering her again and attempting to chase away his pensive expression. Being with Rey, touching her, kissing her, seeing her smile, was the only thing that took away the fears, the anger that almost seemed to spring up inside, whenever he had to be vulnerable.

“A sore loser” she finished breathlessly, and Ben prided himself on the way his impromptu action had made her blush and grin madly.

“Who was that on the phone?” she asked, sitting down beside him on the narrow metal bench and working her boots off.
“No one. Hux” he lied easily, knowing a mere mention of his co-worker’s name would end her line of questioning. Rey pulled a face at the name, and concentrated on working her thick winter socks inside the skates. They were in Prospect Park, the Lakeside rink, by Rey’s choice. Ben would have been more inclined to go for Central Park, as he had when he was young, but Rey had dismissed the crowds and lines. He was always fascinated and endeared by her creative nature, crowned by a heavy dash of pragmatism.

He pulled on his own skates, and followed her, the sensation of walking on the metal grill with the blades, forgotten since boyhood, roaring back to life. His mother had loved to skate, and had loved Christmas too, for that matter. She’d had a huge, white coat, that she would always wear as soon as snow started falling, and a hat, fluffy and warm. She would glide around the ice looking like a Tsarina, escaped from a Romanov family portrait, tugging Ben awkwardly behind her.

He could remember the terror and thrill of the ice, when she had let go of his hand. Afraid to fall, and so very afraid not to, and experience the mad rush of keeping going. Always afraid, he thought to himself now, as Rey stepped confidently onto the white surface and waited for him. He followed, finding his balance quickly. Being afraid hadn’t helped him, in the end, he had fallen without her hand, and waited on the ice, scraped hands dripping blood onto the glazed surface, for his mother’s warm and soft hands to reach for him, snuggling into the comfortable depths of her coat. He thought now, as they started to skate around the outside of the rink, Rey laughing in delight as he pulled her tightly into his side, wrapping an arm around her back, that maybe he had never felt as safe and whole as he had then, when his mother had picked him up off the ice, in all the years since then. Until now. Until Rey.

Rey detangled his arm and shot him a playful look.

“Race you to that tree” she said, pointing to the distance, before taking off, all determined elbows and effortless grace.

It gave him a heart pounding, warming and chilling sensation all at once, a profound gratitude for having her in his life again, that she saw something in him, as impossible is it seemed. And a profound fear, fear of losing her again. That fear was sparking something dark within, he could feel it, feel it burning and twisting through his veins. He couldn’t let the fear win, for then, he was sure, he would lose her again, brought about through his own failure of control. He couldn’t let her see, his madness, his need to possess and control her, his need to make sure she couldn’t leave. He couldn’t let her see, until she could no longer walk away.

The ice-skating had been as much fun as she had hoped, Rey sighed happily as she watched Ben take their skates back to the desk. Since he and his mother talked over her diagnosis, she had waited for him to go off the deep end. But it hadn’t happened. He was upset, and withdrawn a little, but he seemed relieved to know. Maybe he had been able to feel there was something off with her, and now had a reason. She watched him stoop to duck under the plastic roof of the skate rental shack, and smiled, her big tall bigfoot.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the little teacher who thinks she knows everything” a snide voice said, and
Rey stiffened and looked around. Layla’s fathers stood a little way off, wearing the laminate of a rink worker, and glaring at her, his friends giving her similar looks, if not with more jeering.

She saw the pleasant afternoon taking a turn for the worst, and immediately stood, grabbing her and Ben’s things, and started to walk away.

“Looks like the little ninja’s scared to face a man… some defence teacher.” He called once more, and his buddies laughed.

“Who’s that?” Ben asked, appearing at her side, and Rey grabbed his arm, feeling increasingly nervous. She didn’t need to be a psychic to know that Ben wouldn’t take these men calling her names well.

“No one, let’s go” she said hurriedly, pulling on his arm. But, moving Ben when he didn’t want to, was practically impossible, akin to trying to uproot a tree. He simple looked back at the man, his head tilted to the side, hazel eyes contemplative.

“Are you speaking to us?” he called back to them, the men were quiet for a moment, no doubt taking him his height and build, and the increasingly dangerous look on his face.

“Ben, don’t” Rey said, apprehensively, stepping around him to look up into his face.

“Is your new bodyguard? Need him to take you to class and back now?” The men laughed, though less loudly now that it was turning in to a real scene.

“When’s the teacher parent evening, anyway? I’ve got some issues to talk over” Layla’s father continued, making a lewd expression. Rey looked up at Ben, who had stiffened perceptibly under her hands. He took a slow step toward the man, and then another, an inscrutable expression on his face.

“I asked you, if you were talking to us?”

“Yeah, I’m talking to you, well, I’m talking to her”

“Are you sure you’re talking to her?” Ben’s voice had dropped to a menacing tone that Rey hadn’t heard before. His face promised violence as he looked the man up and down, scathingly, from his work uniform, straining around his prominent beer gut, to his thinning hair and red face, broken capillaries decorating a bulbous nose, no doubt the product of a life of drinking too much and thinking too little.

Layla’s father looked unsure for a moment, as Ben pressed in on him, approaching slowly, with predatory intent, and his friends muttered their excuses from the sides and fell back.

“I want you to be really sure, completely certain, that woman-” Ben jerked his head toward Rey, his dark eyes never leaving the older man’s.

“-is who you are directing your vitriol and poorly disguised threats and innuendo at” As Ben reached him, towering over the other man, forcing him to bend his neck at an awkward angle to meet his hard glare, he shifted uncomfortably.

“I want you to be sure that you are insulting my fiancée, before we conclude this conversation” Ben’s tone left no room to speculate what the ending of the exchange would entail. The present and clear certainty of physical violence. Rey jumped at the word fiancée, randomly thrown into a situation that was already pushing her to the edge of her nerves.
“Just tell her to stay away from my girl, and we won’t have a problem” the man blustered. Rey took a grip of herself at that, remembering Layla and the class and suddenly aware of how many people were staring.

“Ben” she said in a much more authoritative tone. She saw his clenched fist jolt at his side. She had to stop this before it spiralled out of control. If Ben lost it, she didn’t know what he would do, and with his training, she was sure he was fully capable of inflicting serious damage in no time. Suddenly in a piercing moment of clarity, she realised how unfair it was that she had to worry that Ben couldn’t control himself, that she had to take the burden of responsibility over his emotions too.

“Ben, I’m leaving. You can come home with me if you want, or you can sleep somewhere else” she snapped, and turned away, her cheeks burning with embarrassment as she left the ice-rink, and made for the tube. She was half way there when she felt his hand close around her shoulder and stop her.

“Rey, where are you going?” Ben demanded.

“Home” she ground out.

“Without me??” he asked, stepping closer to her as she twisted around and made to walk toward the subway entrance.

“That’s your choice!” she snapped, wrenching her arm out his loose grasp. She finally looked up at him, his face was confused, the shadow of his former wrath still hanging over him.

“Why are you the one who’s angry?” he growled, his confused expression melting into frustration.

“Only you get to be angry??” Rey cried, wrapping her arms around her chest, and glaring up at him. She was panicking. She felt angry at Layla’s father for taking away her feeling of safety at the Knights of Ren community hall, and her classes, which had come to mean so much to her. And now, she was angry that she’d have to admit it all to Ben, and let him know she’d kept it from him. And further still, she was angry for being scared of him finding out, scared of his reaction. She was afraid of realising how unequal their relationship was. Afraid to confront that she loved someone that she had to hide things from, for their relationship to be smooth.

“Who was that man? If you don’t tell me, I’ll go back there and find out” he said, aggression still radiating off him.

“He’s the dad of one of my students, ok?”

“And you know this because-“

“Because this isn’t the first time we’ve argued. I know you’ve already realised that, so you can save your ego trip of forcing me to say it, running me down and in circles until I have to spit it out” Rey said, the poisonous words spilling from her mouth easily. Ben seemed immobile in his anger and confusion.

“That man threatened you?” He said, his voice only asking for confirmation of his suspicions. Rey avoided his gaze.

“He wouldn’t really do anything” she muttered, and looked away as Ben pulled her closer, her chest pressing into his.

“Why didn’t you tell me then. Are we keeping secrets from each other? Secrets about threats to
your safety—"

“Aren’t we? Why don’t you tell me everything that threatens your safety, Ben, on a daily basis? Secrets about him!” Rey challenged back. Their furious glares met, warring with each other for dominance, for submission, for autonomy and independence, for acceptance, most of all. Ben looked thrown for a moment by her mention of Snoke, and Rey thought of all the secrets he still thought he carried, that she already knew, which in itself was a secret.

“That’s some double standard you’ve got there. I didn’t tell you because I was afraid of what you’d do” Rey finally confessed, feeling the energy of her fight draining from her. The truth was altogether much sadder than anger was. Anger was sharp and hot and something to hold on to. Sadness, that Ben might be controlling in too many ways, that he might be violent and unpredictable, was a cavernous pain, a hollow feeling, that left her drifting in uncertainty. He’d never use that violence against her, but for her, it was a heady and terrifying feeling, like holding a loaded gun. It was a responsibility that Rey didn’t think she ever wanted to have.

“I didn’t know what you’d do to him, and I don’t want that on my conscience” Ben’s eyes narrowed at her words, losing their fight too, leaving a heartbroken look in place of it.

“You don’t trust me not to hurt a stranger… not to listen to you… you still think I’m a monster” he said slowly. Rey swallowed hard, feeling a tear drip out the corner of her eye.

“I also didn’t tell you, because that class means everything to me, and I don’t want to fight with you about it” she started, and her stomach dropped as his expression hardened again.

“I don’t want to fight about it either, surely, you must see that you can’t go there until this is sorted” his certain tone riled Rey in all the ways she had feared.

“No, I don’t see that, and I don’t agree.” She said, looking away from his intent look.

“You don’t have to agree. You just have to do as you’re told, if you care so little for your personal safety, then you don’t get a say in the matter”

“I’m not quitting, Ben” Rey said, anger and frustrating warring with the tears that were threatening to spill.

“You don’t have a choice Rey. It’s decided” he said, and turned from her, heading for the car park and his car. She watched him go, fighting the urge to jump on him from behind and beat sense into him.

She turned back toward the brightly lit subway stairs and started striding toward them. She was livid, and didn’t want to see him one more minute.

When his arms encircled her waist, lifting her off her feet and swinging her around, she was ready, and twisted instantly away.

“Rey, get in the car” he practically shouted, and it froze her for a second. He never shouted at her. A hundred expressions chased themselves across his face in that instant. Anger, regret, fear. Fear, most of all. He was afraid, and it was fuelling his need for her to submit to him right now. Rey had known these moments might come, when she had agreed to all of this, and she thought she could bear it. But now, feeling her own righteous anger filling her belly, her hands itching to slap him, kick and fight against the loss of her independence, thinking something was very different to being able to do it.

“Excuse me, Miss, are you ok?” someone asked from beside her, and they both snapped from their
silent glaring contest, to a couple standing near them, the man stepping between Ben and Rey.

“Is this guy bothering you?”

“We’re fine.” Ben bit out, his eyes never leaving Rey’s.

“Miss?” the man asked, searching her face.

“She’s fine, I told you. She’s my fiancée” Ben said, and Rey’s anger snapped.

“No, I’m not. Stop calling me that. I’m leaving. Don’t follow me” she said over her shoulder.

“Thanks” she said to the couple, and took off at a jog toward the subway. She was scared to look back and see Ben following her, scared to continue a fight that was veering into dangerous territory.

She didn’t look back, she was too scared to see the look of rejection and betrayal on Ben’s face. Yes, she knew he was worried and all his demons were roaring at him to toss her over his shoulder and put her in the car and take her home, probably lock her in until he’d managed to persuade her to agree with him, as long as that would take. But, she couldn’t stand it. She needed him to let her go tonight, make her own decision, she needed it, to stay sane.

She went through the turnstile and jogged down the stairs to the platform that would take her to Jack’s, and finally looked back and didn’t see him.

She was instantly disappointed and relieved. She felt as though she might be going a little mad, as she sank onto the hard, plastic train seat and closed her eyes, hugging her bag to her stomach, and recalling, how only an hour before they had been skating in perfect unison, frosted air clouding their breaths over their faces, lips stealing quick kisses. Such extremes of emotion were exhausting, and Rey wondered at herself. She had always been calm, even headed, and able to see where Ben was coming from. The difference, she found, now, was even though she could see his reasoning, it drove her crazy. Would he ever be able to change, to trust her? She didn’t know, and the thought was a lead anchor falling through her and hitting the ground with a clang that reverberated up her entire body. She didn’t know.

Ben’s exertion of his will came even faster than she had expected, but then, he was nothing if not a determined man, with the means to back it up.

She had stayed at Jacks, spent time with her easy going, laid back uncle, who hadn’t asked why she had shown up there without warning, with dried tears on her cheeks. Just opened the door wide,
hugged her and ordered take out.

The next evening, after enlisting Finn’s help, she went to class, nerves buzzing in the pit of her stomach. They approached the building, with Finn talking her ear off about the research he had been doing into Art Therapy. She saw a shiny van outside, with the name of a local dojo emblazoned along the side. She pointed silently at the van, and Finn whistled.

“Nice ride, new student?” he asked with a grin.

“I doubt it” Rey said, shouldering her way through the doors, and out the cold, already fearing what she’d find. The class had already started, somehow, even thought she had never changed the times with the girls.

The hall was full of equipment, staffs and gloves, mats and punching pads for sparring. The girls were using it all with gusto, their faces alight with excitement. Two, black clad adults, a man and a woman, were weaving in between them, shouting encouragement and high-fiving people. Rey spied the far corner, set up with more drinks and snacks than she’d ever managed to amass.

“Dude, is this your class, because, no offence, it looks 100 times better than before”

“Offence taken” Rey said flatly, as she caught the eye of one of the instructors. The lady walked over, and Rey could instantly see she practiced what she preached. Her bearing was upright and she looked focused, while relaxed, light on her feet, bouncy with energy.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can tell me what you’re doing here, in my class” Rey said, and Finn pulled a frantic face, before it dissolved into a charming smile.

“Whoa, I think what my… colleague means is that this is normally her group to run…” he tried to smooth over. The instructors face cleared as she nodded.

“You must be Rey, Kylo’s fiancée? This is quite a group you’ve put together, it has a great energy, and it’s great for the community” she said, and Rey resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“And you are?”

“Kaydel. My partner and I run the dojo a few blocks over. Kylo has engaged us to cover the classes, and he said you would know until when” the lady said, seemingly unconcerned with the strange arrangement.

“That’s very kind, but I really don’t need anyone to cover for me, I’m here, as you can see, present and accounted for” Rey said tightly, feeling Finn’s concerned look. Kaydel watched her a long moment, and her looked turned rather sympathetic, which put Rey’s back up even more.

“It’s difficult to please everyone in a community like this, and when you’re working with vulnerable teens, it’s even more difficult, your choices have huge consequences, not just for you, but others too… for them too” she said gently, and Rey felt squeezed. She knew she had lost, that Ben had won, but that didn’t mean she wanted to admit it yet.

“Meaning?” she asked curtly, internally wincing as she did. She hated to be rude, but this woman was delivering Ben’s plans by proxy, and he wasn’t here to take it out on.

“Meaning, if you want to stay and take the class, that’s fine, I’ll just tell Layla she has to sit this one out. That she better leave” Kaydel said, and Rey turned to see the girl in question working with
the other instructor, blocking, a look of concentration on her face.

“Rey” Finn murmured in her ear, his warm hand covering hers.

“This is great, let the girls have a change of pace for a couple of weeks, it’s fine. We’ll go get pizza. My treat.” he said carefully, and Rey dreaded the inevitable questions that Finn would have when they left. She nodded slowly, and let him pull her away from her girls.

“Rey – don’t worry. We’ll take good care of them for you.” Kaydel called, gesturing to her partner, so tall and hulking he would give Ben a run for his money.

“Thanks” Rey managed before Finn dragged her out onto the sidewalk, the snow crunching underfoot as they trudged away from the building.

“So… we’ve some catching up to do… Kylo’s fiancée ” Finn said shortly, as he led her in the direction of their favourite pizza place.

An hour later, and way too much bread and cheese later, Finn relaxed back against the vinyl booth and gave Rey a familiar look. It was the look he gave her when they were about to disagree.

“Ok, let’s talk about the fiancée stuff first, because it’s the easiest one” Finn said, and folding his arms over his chest.

“You know what I’m going to say” he said, and Rey ducked her head and groaned.

“It’s too fast”

“Hell yeah, it’s too fast – so- that’s that.. too fast, slow down and just… chill or something”

“Tell that to Ben.”

“You tell that to Ben. That dude is terrifying, and I’m never disagreeing with him” Finn said. Rey laughed despite herself and rested her elbows on the table, sinking her hand into her hands.

“He’s not being serious, I don’t think, he’s just being annoying about it. He brought it up, and I didn’t really disagree, and now he seems to be rubbing it in my face every chance, telling strangers that we are engaged. He’s just trying to…”

“Pressure you?” Finn said, and Rey saw his expression was carefully blank.

“Tease me, remind me that it’s what he wants, where he sees us… he probably thinks it’s romantic”

Finn raised an eyebrow at that, and then moved on.

“The class at the community centre… I gotta say, Rey, I think Ben’s right.” Rey huffed out her breath and rolled her eyes at him.

“Just, hear me out. This guy already threatened you, he knows when you’ll be there, he could
follow you, corner you, who knows what? Or, he could walk into class and start a fight right in front of the girls”

“'I could take him’ Rey muttered, knowing she was being obtuse even as she did.

“'Yeah, and what a great example that would set for the girls’”

“Standing up to bullies is exactly the type of example I want to set”

“Well, seeing someone’s father get their asses handed to them, or worse, see their teacher get beat up when he brings his friends isn’t very inspirational’ Finn said harshly.

“You feel emotional about it, because you love all those kids, and you want the best for them… this is the best for them, just now. Those instructors can take them, there’s two of them, and probably a lot more from their dojo. They are not alone there. They can back each other up, and go to the authorities if it comes to that”

“It’s not Kaydel… it’s-“

“That he made the decision for you?” Finn offered, and Rey nodded slowly.

“It seems to be a bit of a pattern for you two. I’m not going to lie, I like Ben, I like him for you, but sometimes… these kinds of things, there’s a lot of them, you know.” He said, carefully choosing his words.

“I know. It’s ok, you don’t have to find a way to tell me. I know” Rey said honestly, her chin wobbling a little at the concerned look her best friend gave her. He stood up and moved around her side, wrapping his arms around her.

“Rey, are you ok? You’d tell me, right?” Finn murmured into her hair, as she nodded slowly.

“I’m fine. I’d tell you” she promised, trying not to question why she felt so sad inside.

“You’ve got it so bad… I almost feel sorry for you” Finn sighed, leaning back, his tense expression finally melting into a smile.

“Almost?” Rey asked, echoing his posture.

“Almost… except, and this probably isn’t some earth-shaking revelation, but it’s all I got, and it’s what I know… Love that doesn’t hurt sometimes isn’t really love. Maybe it’s like, or affection, or friendship, even, or fondness… but finding the person you want to spend your whole life with, the person you need to be with… it’s hard, mashing together two personalities, two souls… it’s painful. Even if you’re not meant to be together forever, the experience of love, loving someone, that’s what matters. It changes you, and expands you and turns you upside down, and that shouldn’t be missed, just because it hurts sometimes. Love hurts, and maybe it’s supposed to” Finn said confidently.

“And why is that?”

“If it hurts, you’ll always remember it”

“That was kinda wonderful” Rey said slowly, looking at her old friend with new appreciation. She knew him and Rose sometimes fought, and then they made up, and were all the stronger for it. That they really loved each other, that was something that was never in doubt.
“Well, I have my moments”

Ben heard the microwave ping behind him. Christmas Eve lunch and he was eating a microwave meal, alone, heart sick.

How the season’s change, and yet, everything remains the same.

He had an invitation from his mother for Christmas dinner the next day and no real excuse not to go. He had two tickets to Mount Snow, Vermont, on the dining room table, for Boxing day, when he had planned a surprise trip for Rey, skiing and a private chalet with an outdoor hot-tub. Who was he kidding, he wondered at himself. It was an indulgence for himself, to have her undivided attention, to be the centre of her universe and far from those who would try and pry them apart, merely by existing, and therefore, being more interesting and normal than he could ever be.

The apartment smelt like fresh paint, and he wondered if it was already too late to ask Rey for forgiveness, to offer his contrition. She had been so angry at him, so furious, and so final when she had walked away.

She had been texting him, updating him on her movements, reassuring him that she was still at Jacks, so, he held onto that, reminding himself that she must still care, in some way. She never entered into a conversation with him though, despite his best efforts. These thoughts rotated between miserable and hopeless to despondent and exhausted as he tried to eat lunch, which managed the incredible feat of both tasting and feeling like plastic in his mouth.

“We never put up a tree” the sound of Rey’s voice from the doorway froze him to the spot. He turned slowly, half expecting her to be one of his silent companions, the ones that had haunted him in her absence, conjured by his thoughts of her. But, it was Rey, dressed in a bright red sweater dress and woollen tights, a hat with pom poms on it, a thick white scarf wound around her neck several times.

“We should have had a tree, a real one, and decorations, lots of lights, little twinkling white ones. We should have put it up with Judy Garland playing and heated mulled wine up to drink while we did it, with gingerbread men cooking in the oven” her tone was full of longing, and he had a vivid memory of Rey’s face as she stood before the magnificent tree in his parent’s house, so long ago.

“I don’t remember ever having a tree before for Christmas” At 16, Rey had already mastered appreciation of little rituals and more than him now. There was only one thing he had ever appreciated, and she was standing before him, looking ready to bolt.

He swallowed tensely, suddenly feeling like any wrong move would cement the rift between them.
“Well, let’s do it – all of it” he suggested, his heart fluttering in the long silence that stretched out in the wake of his words, his plea for forgiveness. Then, her mouth was tugging into a half smile, and he knew it was ok, the relief of which almost made his legs give out.

“It’s Christmas Eve” she said, but it didn’t sound like a no, so he found himself smiling, sagging with relief and wonder.

“So what? We have time. It isn’t too late” he said confidently. Rey watched him a little longer, her small smile turning into a full blown one.

“Ok, Solo, let’s go”

Chapter End Notes

First of - thank you so much for the response to the last chapter! I was blown away by you comments, and your kind words - I always feel more awkward writing the fluffy parts, so thank you))

Next - there is a little part of this chapter inspired by the infamous Adam Sackler aka. Adam's character in Girls, my favouritest fav. Can you guess which bit?

Now we are heading into the final phase... and sadly drawing near the end of this story((( Time for the wild speculation to begin!

If you're enjoying it, drop me a line??

xoxox
The needle tears a hole, the old familiar sting

Chapter Notes

Hurt - Nine Inch Nails
Have yourself a Merry little Christmas - Judy Garland Version

All rights to Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Have yourself a merry little Christmas*
*Let your heart be light*
*From now on your troubles will be out of sight*

“This is the song that was playing when I think I realised how much I had fallen for you, as a wistful teen. The older, broody bad boy who saw me as a kid” Rey mused, as she sipped her mulled wine, inhaling a gently curl of steam that arose from the mug, full of cinnamon, cloves and spicy red wine. Ben twisted to see her face, from his position, half under the tree, trying to put water in the stand.

“In retrospect, we should have done this before putting the tree in” he grunted, and Rey curled her legs under her on the sofa, enjoying seeing his jumper ride up over his toned stomach, the pale, creamy skin there kissed by little freckles, each of which, she knew the precise location of.

He pushed himself out and collapsed back on the floor with a sigh.

“Next year” Rey said, with a shrug, and Ben smiled over at her.

“Next year” he agreed softly. The music was bringing goose bumps to her arms, snow was falling gently past the windows of the apartment, and the sitting room was lit up only with the fancy living flame fire they had turned on, the very first time Rey had used it, and the twinky fairy lights Rey had artistically draped over various greenery she had convinced Ben to haul from the cab upstairs.

She felt him touch her foot, and looked down to find him sitting with his back against her knees, pulling her stockinged foot around his side, and pressing his strong fingers into the muscles there.

“16 things with chocolate” he said suddenly, placing her back in the Judy Garland memory of the coffee shop at home, after the library, her first time hanging out with Ben outside school.

“You remember” Rey smiled into her wine.

He looked at her out the corner of his eye.

“Oh Rey, I remember everything” he said simply, sweeping Rey away with his straight-talking romanticism. He wasn’t a person of flowery prose and hidden meaning and intent. He was just himself, and his word robbed her breath away with their feeling and intensity.

“When are we exchanging gifts?” Ben asked suddenly. Rey thought about it, she had gotten Ben
too many small, ridiculous presents, he wasn’t a man who actually needed anything, and she suspected Ben himself had not been able to resist buying more than one gift. It was her first Christmas spent as a romantic couple with someone, and she hadn’t asked him, but she knew it was his too. She had felt an overwhelming urge to spoil him, as impossible as it was, on her budget, and hoped he hadn’t gone overboard on her.

“One tonight, the rest tomorrow?”

“Someone seems awfully confident that they are getting more than one present” Ben said, earning a slap on the side of the head. He apologised with a kiss to her toes.

“If there aren’t bags of presents with my name on it somewhere in this apartment, I’ll be very disappointed” Rey teased, relaxing back with a sigh as Ben turned and rested his head against her thigh. He seemed so still and at peace now, perfectly content to be hanging out, by the fire, putting up Christmas decorations for hours.

“Hang on” she said, wiggling out from under him, and skipping through to their room. She had hidden his presents in a myriad of places, and only hoped now that she could find the one she needed. Soon, her fingers where closing over the heavy rectangle, and she felt a little nervous. It was a risky present, she knew it, but it was also a heartfelt one, and one that reinforced the direction she hoped they were headed in.

She went back to the living room, finding Ben where she’d left him.

“You first” she said, as she sat back down on the couch and handed him the present. He looked at it, turned it over in his hands, a flicker of childish excitement coming over his features, and she wondered when the last time he’d had a Christmas present was? From an ex-girlfriend? From his mother? From Rey herself? Ben started to open it, and soon the festive paper was sitting on the floor, and he was looking at the picture.

She had found the photo on an old phone, and emailed it to herself. She could still remember the night she had hidden in his room, and heard him smash it, after a fight with his parents. It had been Christmas Eve then too.

The frame was wide, a pale, duck egg blue, glazed to a perfect sheen, except for a predominate, almost jarring gold, spider web crack, running down one side. The effect was somehow more beautiful. Inside was the picture of Han, Leia and Ben, that he had broken that night, in a fit of rage. She had never seen it again after. Ben stared at it for a long time, in silence.

“It’s Kintsugi…” Rey began, but Ben was already nodding.

“The Art of precious scars” Ben finished for her.

Rey smiled tentatively at him, feeling all the words she wanted to say behind her teeth, crowding up her throat, and unable to escape. How he was a beautiful work of Kintsugi to her, that they both were, that the act of finding beauty in broken things, for things being more beautiful, because they had been broken, was a sentiment that made sense to her soul.

That she knew how and why he had broken, that there didn’t need to be anymore secrets between them, and she was sure if they could eliminate them, the scars in Ben would seal with gold, making him whole and complete again.

“You didn’t have any pictures of them here” she said, as Ben continued to stare at the photo.

He stood up abruptly, and she watched a little nervously as he walked to the fireplace, and carefully
placed the heavy photo frame there, the only adornment on the wide, graceful ledge.

“It’s –” his voice was rough, and Rey could feel his turbulent emotions. She went to stand behind him, and wrapped her arms around his back, pressing her face against his jumper. His hand touched hers, knotted, just barely, around his stomach.

“Ben?” she could feel that he didn’t want to talk about the picture, couldn’t perhaps.

“Ben… It’s my turn” she teased and saw relief loosen his shoulders as he turned around and pulled a strip of fabric out his pocket.

“What’s that?” she asked doubtfully, even as her wicked imagination started down a path of blindfolds and silk ties. She swallowed hard, looking up at him as he carefully placed the black blindfold across her face and tied it behind her head.

“Not what you think” he said, smirking as a fleeting disappointed frown crossed her forehead, and he slipped the soft fabric up and over her eyes.

“But we can play that game after… if you’d like to” he whispered in her ear, making her whole body clench from the rough brush of his stubble, longer than ever after a week off work, and his soft lips. He took her hand and started to lead her through the apartment, as she tried to guess what it could be. After walking for so long, she surmised that they must be in the next extension, near the dojo and the second spare room.

“Ok, the light isn’t great right now, but it’s night and winter so…” he was muttered, switching on lights and bustling around her. Then he was taking off the blindfold, and Rey blinked at the scene before her.

It was the extra spare room, except it wasn’t anymore. In place of the characterless bed and dressing table, was a chest, bursting with art supplies and a trestle table, a love seat under the window and an easel, her easel, sitting in the middle. Soft light filled the room, falling over the stack of stretched canvases in the corner, blank and ready to be painted on.

“What is this?” She breathed, feeling overwhelming. Ben squeezed her hand, standing by her side.

“It’s yours. Your room Rey, to create in, to think in, to feel at home in… it’s your studio” he said, flashing a grin so handsome she could have kissed him senseless right there and then.

“Merry Christmas Rey.”

January brought with it cold and hard temperatures, snow upon snow and Rey tucked up in bed ill again.
Their trip upstate had created a misty, hazy memory of fire lit nights, making love on the rug in front of the fire, or in the claw foot bathtub, or four poster bed. It had just been Ben and Rey, and in that perfect bubble of isolation, no Snoke, no First Order Finance, no well-meaning, worried friends and no community centre classes bringing tension between them. Instead it was cooking side by side in the little kitchen, it was Ben teaching her to ski and her watching him traverse the slopes with ease, as she drank her weight in Irish hot chocolates and it was watching the snow fall past the chalet windows as they read side by side in perfect silence, her head nestled in his shoulder, his thumb tracing circles into her bare shoulder. Even as Rey had revelled in it, she had known it couldn’t last, and maybe that was why it was so perfectly perfect, because of its fleeting nature.

She lay in bed the first morning Ben had left for work in the new year, watching him go with a heavy weight in her chest. She wanted to pull him back to her and beg him never to go back, just turn around and never see Snoke again, never set foot in the building. Leia had emailed her, asking if she could go ahead and speak to Luke about the possibility of taking on a student. Rey had hesitated, knowing that Leia was really asking if she had spoken to Ben, and if she wanted to go ahead. She hadn’t spoken to Ben, hadn’t wanted to break the peace between them, and the fragility of that contentment, saddened her heart further.

Rey stared at the ceiling, wondering if she should risk trying to eat a little toast. She had been a little over-adventurous in the resort sushi restaurant on their last evening on holiday, and her stomach was well and truly angry at her. She had barely managed to keep anything down the trip back from the mountain, making the four-hour car journey interesting at the very least. Luckily Ben seemed to enjoy taking care of her, when she was miserable and pathetic, so she hadn’t felt too disgusting as she had stood by the side of the car, boots slipping in the snow, vomiting by the side of the road, Ben holding her hair back, passing her water and tissues.

Her stomach gurgled, and she decided to test whether it was hunger or sickness, easing her legs out of bed gingerly.

“Snoke isn’t waiting around for these, given how you dragged your feet on the previous round” Hux was saying, as he lingered in the doorway, his eyes on the reports he had placed on Ben’s desk.

“I’ll run them up there when I’m done” Ben said shortly, relieved when Hux left promptly upon being dismissed. He was getting far too chatty lately, Ben thought with irritation.

He flipped open the folder in front of him, and stared, his stomach tightening, at a new round of trials for another type of drug. First Order were financing the production of this particular drug, Snoke sure that it would bring an excellent return for his investors. He had already found out that the production company, owned by a shell organisation, was traceable back to Snoke directly. Snoke had been tying strings of deceit and corruption around him so long, he barely felt surprised anymore.
When Holdo had explained the angle that they were investigating from, Ben had gone back over previous reports, some spanning years back. What he had found had made him fell ill, when he had seen his signature on them. Now, he could see the similar hallmarks of forged certificates and tampered test results.

He pushed the papers away and sat back. He had to call Holdo. How could he stall anymore, when every time he put his signature on one of these, he was committing fraud and who knows what other illegal activities, to say nothing of the moral ramifications.

They were making generic medicines at competitive prices for a whole range of illnesses, the difference was, that the drugs they were financing seemed to be mostly placebos. The latest one was for a rather expensive type of cancer related medication. He thought about hardworking, honest men like Jack, spending life savings on medication that wouldn’t work. He thought of his mother, dutifully holding out her arm for a sharp needle full of nothing.

And he had done nothing. Cowed by Snoke, he had barely dared to question what his mentor had used his name to achieve. Ben’s name, securing bank loans and investment, good press and reputation. He couldn’t quite imagine how he had let it all happen, almost as if the years between high school and now were a fever dream, where his body had continued on, without his mind, without his conscience. He didn’t dare to consider why he had let himself stay with Snoke so long, why he had never run away, gone anywhere, cut ties with the old man who made his skin crawl. Was he so afraid of being alone? Did he believe in his heart that Snoke was the only one who would accept him, as he was, with his hands so dirty and his soul so burdened. Was being beside Snoke a way of punishing himself, every day, the ultimate self-flagellation?

Without Snoke telling him what to do, who he was… what was left? Who did Rey see, when she looked at him with love? Did she see a strong and confident business man, controlling in bed, wildly successful and crazily in love with her? Did she see Kylo Ren, even if she called him Ben.

What would she see if she knew the truth, in all it’s hideousness. A snivelling victim who had let his abuser control his life, a man who only knew how to crawl servile on his belly to the very man who had broken him. A man too pathetic to love. A man who had never known even a spark of Rey’s fire, her courage and strength. A little boy too scared to let go of his abuser’s hand, even if it led him to commit terrible acts, hurt people. A monster. As his emotions stormed over his face, he suddenly felt aware of the security feed, and the man who was undoubtedly enjoying his crisis of confidence.

He scooped up the report and shoved it in his briefcase. He couldn’t stay there, under Snoke’s watchful gaze one more moment, without losing his head. There was only one person who could make him feel as though everything would be ok, even if it wasn’t true. Only one person who calmed him and centred him.

“I’m leaving early, I’ll finish the day from home” Ben instructed Margot as he left the building, passing out the doors felt like taking off lead boots. He didn’t know how to stop Snoke, he didn’t know how to extricate himself from this mess, he didn’t know how to tell Rey who he really was, the kind of man he really was. The same fearful demons that chased him night and day seemed to be getting harder and harder to ignore, to shake off. Only seeing Rey soothed him. He just needed Rey.
Rey awoke from her nap suddenly, her heart was pounding and she wasn’t sure why. She couldn’t remember the dream, already fading away into the darkness of sleep, as she struggled up in the covers and glanced at the clock, seeing it was late afternoon. The room was already darkening, with barely any light seeping in the windows, and she reached out a snapped on the bedside lamp, and jumping with shock as she saw a dark figure sitting in the chair by her bedside.

“Ben!! What are you doing, sitting there in the dark.” She chided, the spike of adrenaline slowly easing into her bloodstream, as she turned an accusing look at him.

“I came home early to check on you” he said, evading an explanation, as he was so adept at doing. He stood up and came to sit beside her, sinking into the mattress. Rey studied him, he seemed off, a little wild-eyed. The pulse in his throat was beating quickly, though his face was studied and blank. He trailed a slow, deliberate hand down her arm, and they both watched it go. Then, he raised it to her collarbones and slowly swept in in uneven circles, an expanding dragging that brushed over her breast after a moment, before closing over her nipple.

“If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved” he quoted quietly, as Rey arched into his hand, the gentle ministrations making her melt back against the bedding. He carefully tugged open her top, untying the loose ribbons at the neck and pulled it wide apart, inspecting her chest with a tender expression, before leaning forward and scraping his nose up the valley between them, and his stubbled chin lightly over her nipple. Heat pulsed through her at the sensation.

“Ben” she whispered into his hair, tugging his head upward slowly, and his mouth closed on hers. He kissed her softly, then deeply and languidly. He carefully bit her lip, and sucked it into his mouth, running his tongue over the sensitive flesh.

“Ben?” she breathed again, as his waiting hand teased the waist band of her pyjamas.

“Yes, princess?” he asked, and she melted a little more, before grabbing his head and pulling him back.

“I can’t… I’m sick” he murmured, his soft lips already descending again to her neck. She let the touches continue, before wiggling away to the other side of the bed, moving feeling like a cold shower, as she slid deeper into the cooler sheets. Ben watched her patiently, and then stood up slowly, stripping off his jacket and tie, kicking off his shoes, all the while, watching her intently, unbuttoning his shirt in a way that set fire to her blood.

“No, we can’t. Unless, you have a condom?” she whispered hopefully, using her foot to push him away as he knelt on the bed and advanced on her, her smile creeping over her face. He caught her foot, and sucked a toe into his mouth.

“I wasn’t aware that it was a sexually transmitted disease you’re suffering from” he murmured,
“And since I know my own history, and I know yours” he flashed her dark look full of pride and possession that she rolled her eyes at, even as she gasped as his thumbs dug into a delicious point in her heel.

“Being sick can affect my birth control” she whispered as he gently placed her foot on the bed and started to kiss up her leg. She couldn’t control the moan that slipped out as he paid particular attention to the back of her knee, and then started up her inside thigh. He reached her pyjama shorts, and hooked them aside with a determined finger, and Rey trembled as he brushed the folds, hidden there, already warm and soft for him.

“Ben, we have to stop” she gasped.

“We don’t really” he murmured, so soft she wasn’t sure she’d really heard it.

“I don’t want to stop” he said, in a low, growly voice she found groan inducing.

“Neither do I, but we’d regret it later, when you had to go out and find the morning after pill” she breathed, feeling the same pull to abandon all reason anyway, give into the heat of sensation.

“I wouldn’t regret it.” His words stilled her completely.

She wound her hands into his hair and pulled his head up.

“What?” she demanded quietly, searching his face for his meaning. He looked into her eyes, unabashed.

“Stop worrying about birth control. We don’t need it.” He said, without the least sign that his words were earth shifting in magnitude.

“Of course, we need it. Of course, I need it. I’m not ready… to be a mother”

“You’d be a wonderful mother Rey, you were born to nurture” he whispered, sitting up and brushing his lips against hers, trying to entice her back into a kiss. She pushed him away by the shoulders, her shocked gaze on his long back as he leaned away finally, displaying his broad chest and taut abdominals, looking down at her defensive posture as she locked her arms around her knees.

“Are you insane? Have you hit your head? Has Hux poisoned you?” he huffed out a breath and ran a large hand through his hair, crowning his head like a dark halo.

“No need to be so dramatic” he said dryly.

“I think there is every need. I’m 23 years old.”

“Fine, be dramatic” he said, quirking his lip in that smirk that she loved so very dearly.

“Very funny. I’m 23 years old, I can’t have a baby”

“Yes, you can, you’re an adult” he said, in a reasonable tone that made her want to smack him in the side of the head.

“I am not ready to have a child, and neither are you-“

“No, that’s where you’re wrong. I am ready. I am ready to have a child, with you.” He said, his
face startlingly open for a moment. She couldn’t stop staring at him.

“What about – work and-“

“We’d have help, we’d have each other, and my mother, I doubt I could get rid of her easily, and my nanny, Threepio. You could still work, find whatever balance suited you” he was saying, and the words were all so ludicrous she could only focus on the most simple ones.

“Threepio?? You had a nanny called Threepio?”

“Patricia Penelope Price-Oswald – three Ps and an O. Threepio” he explained, and an unbidden image popped up in Rey’s head of a tiny boy with black curls trying to get his mouth around that name, and settling for his own version.

“I thought we’d get married first, and then start having children, but, I am willing to negotiate on the order of things” he said, and something snapped inside Rey. She pushed the covers off and stepped out of bed, the cold floor instantly sending a chill through her weakened body.

“You’re insane” she muttered, standing in front of him, arms crossed and chin up and pushing him back as he tried to drape her dressing gown over her scantily dressed form.

“Why? Because I know what I want? Because I finally want things in this life, I can finally imagine a future, one that I want to live, and I want to do everything with you?” he asked, losing patience with her avoidance of his attempts to warm her up, and standing and grabbing her tightly into his chest, when she shivered violently.

“Back in bed, now” he said lowly, and she acquiesced, but only because she felt a feverish rush of goose bumps shudder over her. He pulled the cover over her to the neck and started to tuck it in on all sides. She watched him suspiciously.

“Did Threepio used to do this for you?” she asked, and was treated to a rare smile.

“She’s a great nanny, you’ll love her” he finally seemed to take in her shocked expression, and sank back down on the bed to sit at her side.

He stared at her a long time, the smile melting slowly from his face, and that hated blank mask gradually replaced it.

“It’s too soon to talk about any of this” Rey said, knowing that he had seen the answer already in her eyes.

“If it’s too soon, we’ll get married first, and worry about kids later” he pressed, though she could see the fight had gone out of him. He was still and braced for rejection, his defences as high as ever.

“Ben-“ he turned his face sharply at her words, drawing in a breath.

“Don’t“ he said, rubbing a hand over his face, suddenly looking tired. She wiggled an arm out of the cover and hesitantly touched his back.

“I just… I just don’t know-“ she wavered, unsure what to say. She wanted to say that she couldn’t think about a future with him yet, because she didn’t know if she could be all he needed, she didn’t know if he’d ever feel at peace. She didn’t want to have kids with someone who had cut off half his life and was unable to face his past. Someone who was always so close to closing down on her, surrendering to anger and violence.
“Don’t know about having kids, or don’t know about me?” he suddenly pressed, and there was a rough quality to his voice that broke her heart a little bit.

She bit her lip, her eyes trained on his profile. He suddenly turned to her and pushed her backwards into the soft pillows, kissing her desperately. Her arms came around him reflexively, and she kissed him back, matching his longing and desperation at every turn. His hands were scalding brands on her skin, slipping under the covers, moving along her sides and waist, before his heavy weight was settling between her legs, and he was gripping her hips, his fingers hooking the fabric of her shorts.

“Stop, Ben… we can’t” she whispered in his ear, and he stilled. His face was still buried in her neck when he spoke.

“We can” he argued, but there was little fight in it.

“I can’t” she admitted. He pulled back to look at her face, and she was met with the features she held so dear only inches away, as his expressive eyes tried to read her soul.

“You promised… you promised to submit to me – surrender to me” he reminded her, and his ragged tone was a physical pain to hear.

“I am. I have. But not in this. I can’t.” She said, and saw him flinch from her words, his emotionless mask slipping a fraction.

“Why won’t you stay with me, Rey? Why do you keep trying to leave?” he asked roughly, and Rey frowned at his words.

“I’m right here, Ben. I’m not trying to leave. I’m here.”

“For how long?” he asked, his eyes looking lost for a moment.

“For as long as you want me, I told you that” she said, and he pulled away, turning to the side, and caged his body in his long arms, taking himself away from her. She sat at his side, and tugged on his arm.

“Ben… what’s going on?” she asked quietly. The room was fully dark now, with only a small pool of light from the bedside spot light. She could hardly see his face, turned toward a dark wall, only the glint of his eyes.

“You’re wrong. I know you mean it, when you say it. I know you wouldn’t lie to me, on purpose, you’re not that kind of person… but you’re wrong” he said at length.

“Wrong about what?”

“You will leave me. When you know… everything there is to know about me, you won’t be able to bring yourself to stay.” Rey bit her lip, hovering on the edge of the bed, sure they were on the precipice of something huge, a yawning dark pit beneath them.

“Do you mean – things at work?” she asked gingerly. He already knew about Catherine’s investigation and Rey’s part in it, he must know that she suspected that First Order weren’t up to any good. He shrugged.

“In part, but not really… there’s other things, about my past” he broke off, swallowing hard.

“Ben, you know you can tell me anything… I’ve shown you everything I am, the very worst of it–“
“Rey, there’s nothing you could do, or have ever done, that would make me love you less” Ben stated simply.

“Well, ditto” Rey said, and Ben tensed, before shaking his head a little.

“You don’t know… you can’t imagine” he said, sounding so certain. Rey’s inner voice was screaming at her, this was it, this was time to tell him that she knew about Snoke, she knew it all, and she loved him anyway. He was going to tell her, going to pull the memories of Snoke out into the light.

“I – I killed my father” he said, and it took Rey a full few seconds to realise that he hadn’t said what she’d expected. She stared at him, saw the muscle tensing in his jaw, saw his shame and fear, clouding his gaze in the darkness.

“What?” she breathed, confused.

“I want to tell you about the night my father died. I want to tell you how I killed him.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry
Anywhere, I would've followed you

Chapter Notes

Say Something - A Great Big World and Christina Aguilera

Thank you so much for the comments, I love to read your gut reactions. Here is part II of the previous chapter, diving straight back in where we left off. Because I love you guys and have no chill.

SENSITIVE CONTENT INSIDE - SKIP TO THE END FOR A NON-DESCRIPTION RECAP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey sat frozen into a stunned silence, her hand rubbing large, warm circles on his bare skin.

“I was a horrible kid. Ungrateful, spiteful” Ben said quietly, and Rey’s heart squeezed at him, judging himself so horribly, when he had been through hell as a child.

“My father wasn’t a bad man. A little reckless and unthinking, maybe not the best fit for my mother, but they tried. If not for me, they probably would have gone their separate ways, years before. I was the one who damned them… bound them together, when all they did was hurt each other.”

Rey didn’t know what to say, and so, simply listened. Ben didn’t need someone to whisper platitudes to him, he wouldn’t believe them, even if she did. He need someone to witness, someone to hear him.

“When I was young, I knew he saw something off in me, I wasn’t like him. My father, the scoundrel, he was dashing and charming, and the life and soul of the party. Like your friend – Poe” Ben said, suddenly sending her a sideways look.

“It just got worse as I got older. We used to do things together, go to the airstrip and fly, he loved to fly. But all that stopped as I got older. He didn’t want to spend time around me, and I didn’t want to see him. I was always so angry –“ Ben said, his voice breaking a little on the last word.

“The night he died, we fought. We said terrible things – I said terrible things” Ben said hollowly.

“I told him that I blamed him, for a childhood of neglect and loneliness, that his selfishness had torn my mother in two, how she cried when he was gone, how he had broken her heart again and again. I told him I was ashamed to call him my father, and sometimes, I would pretend he had died, because I preferred it” Ben’s last words were choked. Rey swallowed her our tears, resolved not to let Ben see how his confession brought back her nausea.

“We tore around that old house, me accusing, him, evading and drinking, but listening… he listened to all of it. He kept trying to talk to me about the past, like he understood anything, like he
could know… He never really knew anything, he never cared to see what was in front of his face.” Ben said roughly, anger joining his pain, as Rey saw his clenched fists were trembling with suppressed rage.

“He kept trying to convince me that it wasn’t too late, that we could still fix our relationship, still fix me. The last thing I told him was that I had stopped waiting for him to come home, to save me, to see me, when I was ten years old, and that was the day I started to hate him. I told him it was too late for us, too late for me, and that I can only be the man he made me now.” The stream of memory slowing, Ben let out a juddering sigh.

“But I didn’t hate him… I never did. I’ve only ever hated myself. I said those things to him, and he stormed out of the house and got into his car, after half a bottle of whiskey and he died, with tears on his cheeks. Tears caused by me… because I broke his heart. He died thinking I hated him” Rey wanted to deny that, because she knew it couldn’t be true. She was sure Han Solo had died with guilt on his shoulders and full of shame, but she didn’t want to distract Ben from the truth he was so close to telling her, and when he seemed to be finished talking, she made her move.

“And so you see… I am a monster” he said stiffly, as Rey moved off the bed and knelt between his knees on the floor, where he was hunched over himself. He immediately straightened the sleeves on her dressing gown, pulling it closer to her throat to make her warm.

“Ben, you’re not a monster. You could never be a monster. You’re just a man – just a person, and people sometimes do things they regret” she said, imploring him to listen with her eyes, but he remained withdrawn, locked in his memories.

“Where was your father going that night? Why did he get in the car?” she asked gently, giving him time to recover himself. Ben shrugged slightly.

“I doubt he wanted to be near me… just away, I guess” he said non-committedly.

“Ben, you said you had stopped waiting for your father to save you.” She said softly, running her fingers into his hair, and as he leaned into the comforting touch, started threading her fingers through the soft curls. He hummed against her throat as she leaned up between his legs.

“Save you from what?” she said, and felt him freeze. She continued playing with his hair, as though she hadn’t felt his sudden paralysis, and gave him time to school his features, before sinking back onto her heels and looking up at him. His face was painted on one side by blue and charcoal shadows and the other with the warm lamp light.

“Save you from who?” she whispered, and saw a child-like look of fear sweep over the features of the man she so desperately loved.

“I can’t say, who knows” he replied, equally quiet, and it was eerie for a moment, as though she was speaking to an eight year old Ben.

“I think you know…” she said steadily.

“Remember, there is nothing you could do, or have ever done, that would make me love you less” She echoed his previous words to him, and he stared back at her for a burning moment.

“I don’t know” he said again, his head shaking slightly, a denial he wasn’t able to overcome and Rey felt a piercing disappointment in her chest, sudden and sharp.

“You do know, Ben, and so do I” she said, before she could over think it. Ben frowned at her, pulling back from her hands.
“What do you think you know?” he asked, and she could feel the barriers, after being so open and vulnerable, flying back up. She could taste the fear in his voice.

“I know about Snoke, Ben. I found your father’s personal effects from the accident. I saw the picture. I know”

“You know…” he repeated, his face was a horrible sort of blank.

“What do you know?” he asked slowly.

“Everything. I know everything” she said, needing the pretence to be out of the way. Needing to be able to comfort the man she loved, help him drag his secrets into the light, where they might dry up and float away, instead of festering in the dark.

He stood up abruptly, and Rey moved aside as he went past her to the window. She could see his hands were clenching and unclenching by his sides. His chest was moving erratically, and his colour was rising, as he prowled back and forth. She scrambled to her feet as Ben came to a stop in front of the large mirror hanging on the wall, and stared at himself in it. She could see his pulse jumping, and that same wild look was back in his eye.

“Ben!” she stared, and cried out in shock as he lashed both fists out suddenly, into the mirror, fracturing his reflection, a hundred tiny shards showering the carpet. He let out a howl of rage and terror, and punched the broken glass again, this time, his fists connecting with the sharp, glittering edges of mirror, and blood splattered the wall on both sides.

“Ben!!” Rey cried, taking a step onto the glass strewn floor to reach him, careless of the sharp pain in her foot.

“Stop – stay back!!” Ben shouted at her, flinging out a hand to stop her, wavering in the air between them, blood dripping freely down his forearms, his eyes on her bare feet.

He looked almost feral at that moment, like a blood splattered berserker, standing on the battle field once it was all over. Rey realised he was shaking.

“Ben, please… come to me” she pleaded, daring to step once more on the glass, and relieved when Ben did move toward her, his own bare feet crunching heedlessly over the mirror shards.

Instead of stopping though, he brushed straight past and grabbed his shirt from the floor. He pulled it on with jerky movements, blood spilling from his hands.

“He said, trying to grab his arm, but was easily evaded. He went into the sitting room and straight to the door, pulling on a jacket, and shoving his feet into shoes.

“Ben, I’m sorry - I shouldn’t have said that - I shouldn’t-“

“Have told me that you know, how long have you known?” he asked suddenly, and Rey was pinned in place by his fierce tear-stained look.

“That doesn’t matter”

“It matters to me” he said, and Rey flinched at his raw tone, twisting her hands, helpless to stop the oncoming hurt. She didn’t want to say, couldn’t bring herself to. She knew how he would interpret it, and cursed herself for not thinking ahead. Why had she pushed him, why had she expected it to be easy?
In her silence, Ben’s face twisted, like the bottom had fallen out his world.

“It was that night, that you came to me. The night you changed your mind about me.” He stated, his tone resigned. Rey shook her head automatically, wanting to deny what it sounded like, wanting to make him understand that she didn’t pity him, that finding out didn’t change what she had already felt for him. But her mouth couldn’t seem to work.

“Tell me it wasn’t and I’ll believe you” he said slowly, and when she couldn’t, he turned on his heel and left, the sound of the apartment door shutting, sounded like a gun shot.

Rey stood and stared at the closed door, unable to believe what had happened, how she had just seen Ben implode so thoroughly.

She took a step, and winced, feeling a splinter of glass in her foot. Limping into the bathroom, she lowered herself onto the edge of the tub, and let herself cry a little. The, she let herself cry a lot.

She cried and cried until her head pounded and her abdominals ached even more, as they had been on and off all day. Eventually, the tears eased off into hiccups. Her belly ached with grief, her sick feeling made a hundred-fold. She pulled her foot up onto her lap and looked at it. Only a small shard of mirror was slipped under the pad of her big toe. She felt like pushing it further in for a moment. Punishing herself for ripping Ben apart, taking away his safe place, and his right to tell her when he was ready.

Instead, she carefully pulled it out, a runnel of blood flowing in its wake. She stood, feeling suddenly dizzy, as she went to the medicine cabinet for a plaster. She barely recognised the person looking back at her in her reflection as she stared at herself. Failing to find what she was looking for, she wandered out to the kitchen and looked in the cupboards for the plaster, wondering if it was too soon to call Ben. It was agonising, not knowing where he’d gone and what he was doing. The worry was making the cramps in her belly worse by the second.

She then spied his phone, sitting on the kitchen counter. He’s been so lost in his own pain he hadn’t even realised he’d left it. He probably didn’t want to speak to her anyway, she thought, glumly.

As she turned to go back to the bathroom, her heel slipped on the tile, and she threw her hands out to balance, feeling her dizziness press down on her harder. She looked down at the white kitchen tile, and stared at the pool of blood there. The cut on her foot was small, it shouldn’t be bleeding so much, she thought stupidly, even as her stomach cramped again.

Her eyes followed the paths of red up her shin, and then higher still, to her inside thigh.

She stared dumbly as another gush of blood dripped down her legs.

The cramps pressed down, and all her symptoms suddenly clicked into place, as Rey held onto the edge of the kitchen counter, and grunted, feeling a little more blood gush down her legs. Her first thought was to call Ben. Ben would take care of her. Ben would make it better. But, she was alone, and Ben unreachable. She let out a cry of frustration, more of a roar, full of the pain and anguish of the whole night and sent his phone spinning off the counter, landing with a clatter on the floor.
The ER at St. Luke's was efficient and clinical, which was perfect, because Rey didn’t want to feel anything. She watched numbly as nurses walked past the curtain, one of them bringing her pain killers, giving her tepid water to wash it down.

Poe sat beside her, after her frantic call to Rose had gone unanswered, she had tried Finn, who had left his phone at Poe’s.

Poe had come straight away, after telling her to either call 911 or get a cab straight to the ER. Now, he sat at her bedside as they waited for the doctor to confirm what she already suspected.

About 10 minutes later, her doctor appeared, carrying a box of tissues.

“Miss Nessuno, sorry to keep you. I’ve looked at the blood work and from your symptoms and the physical exam, I surmise that you have had a very early miscarriage.”

Poe looked at her quickly, and reached out for her hand, squeezing her cold fingers between his warm, vital ones and Rey forced herself to listen to the doctor, instead of the roaring in her ears.

“This is a very common thing, it doesn’t have any impact on your ability to conceive or carry a baby to full term in the future. You were less than 3 months gone, which is the most common time for this sort of miscarriage.”

“I didn’t know I was pregnant” Rey confessed. The doctor was nodding.

“Again, that happens a lot, and then, it just feels like a very heavy period. Are you and your partner trying for a baby?” The doctor looked to Poe, and Rey didn’t feel like explaining.

“No, not yet”

“Well, when you do, just remember that nothing has changed, and this has no lasting repercussions, nor does it have any implications for your chances of conceiving. Ok?”

"Is there a reason it happened? Did I do something?” Rey asked.

"No, at this stage, there's not much influence external factors could have. It's likely been happening for a few days at least, your body realising the pregnancy wasn't viable, and this is really the last step"

“Can I go home?” Rey asked tightly, suddenly wanting nothing more than her own bed and the smell of Ben around her.

“You could stay overnight, if you wanted, however, there is nothing to do but rest, take painkillers. Be gentle with your body. Keep an eye on the bleeding, it should tamper off in a few hours, and stop completely after a day or two. It’s your choice”

“I’ll go then” Rey said, and looked to Poe, who nodded at her immediately, standing to follow the doctor out to give her privacy. As Rey stood shakily, and pulled on her underwear, pressing in the thick maternity pad the nurse had given her for the bleeding, she felt like falling apart. What would
they do, if she just went to pieces right here, she wondered. What would Poe do? What would Ben?

A few drops of blood marked the floor under her feet, the off coloured tile dotted with dark, almost black-red patches. She thought of those moments that define you, and change you and divert your path, and knew she wouldn’t forget that image soon.

She took a deep steadying breath, and pulled on her sweatpants. This was her body, and her pain, and she could handle it, she told herself, pulling the curtain back and seeing Poe, standing just outside, holding her bag.

“Let’s get you home”

Rey didn’t remember falling asleep. They had come home in near silence, and then, before she had gathered the courage to go into the bedorom, she had sat down for a moment, while Poe insisted on cleaning up the glass in the bedroom. Then, there was darkness.

Now, she heard the soft murmur of voices, low and masculine. Her eyes felt so heavy, her head so fuzzy, she didn’t want to lift it. She could almost make out the words. One of the voices was hard with controlled anger, the other taciturn and halting. She struggled to make out the last, as she heard the door open in the distance.

“Rey is not an ordinary person. She deserves better than this. She deserves better than you. She just hasn’t realised it yet”

The door closed with a soft click, and then, she heard the soft sound of someone walking toward her. She could feel that it was Ben, her body relaxing in his presence, as always, as though her other half had been returned, and she could finally rest.

He had come home, and now, faced with him, she realised there was a part of her that had worried that he wouldn’t. She had exposed his biggest secret, ripped away all the wrapping and exposed his biggest vulnerability, for someone as broken as Ben, it was difficult for her to comprehend how he must be feeling. She felt like she had violated him, his trust in her, and it crushed her a little more.

She felt his blunt fingers, oh so gently brushing the hair off her forehead, and opened her eyes. He was crouching beside her in the half light. He stared down at her, his expressive face sadder than she’d ever seen, and more afraid.

“Poe told me” he said suddenly, his expression bleak. She just stared at him, tired beyond all belief, and unsure of how to start putting themselves back together again.

“So you want me to leave?” he asked quietly, and Rey immediately shook her head. She wasn’t sure of much at that moment, but she was sure of that.

“Tell me what to do… tell me how to fix this” he said, a broken plea. New tears surged to Rey’s eyes as she looked at Ben’s wind chapped face.

“You first” Rey said softly, imploring him with her eyes to tell her how to take back what she had said. Ben ducked his head, his strong shoulders slumped in defeat.
“Take me to bed” she said after a long moment. He stood up and picked her up gently, his arms curving under her thighs and shoulders like she could break.

He laid her gently down in bed, the covers crackling lightly as they pulled them over each other, unwashed blood, clothes and all and Ben gathered her into his chest, as her head found its favourite spot in the nook of his chin and shoulder.

She felt his heart beating under her ear, her hand resting on his stomach lightly as they both stared at the ceiling.

Rey’s eyes grew heavier and heavier, her body tired and sore. She could hear Ben’s breathing deepen beside her. She knew she should say something, tell him how much she loved him, how nothing had changed, how nothing could change when she had waited her whole life to be with him, just like they were.

But her words had all flown away in that horrible darkness, when Ben had realised that she knew, when he had chosen to shatter his reflection rather than face it. The way to fix it had fallen through her fingers, like spots of black-red blood on a hospital floor.

Eventually, Rey succumbed to the exhaustion, and side by side, they slept, the silence remaining unbroken.

Chapter End Notes

SUMMARY: Rey tells Ben that she knows about Snoke and his childhood abuse. Ben gets upset and leaves. Rey suffers a very early miscarriage and goes to the hospital. Poe joins her, and takes her home afterwards. Ben returns home and they go to bed together, with their issues unresolved.

Hey you guys... just going ahead and posting this, as it was really all one chapter but felt too long, also I hate cliffhangers.

What do you guys think? Let me know if you want to get off the pain train yet...

So, by my estimate... I'm thinking just a 2-3 more chapters left of Part 3... which I can't believe!

However, this story has not quite worked out the way I planned... and so... I don't think it's going to get wrapped up in 3 parts/acts.

So... officially introducing - Act 4: Balance.

Happy? Sad? xoxox
Like a cat in a bag, waiting to drown, this time I'm coming down

Chapter Notes

The drugs don't work - The Verve

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That night of silence, deafening after the revelations that came before, had embedded a tiny splinter between her and Ben, and she could feel it, whenever she looked at him, touched him. A kernel of distance, and every time he moved away, before her fingers could reach him, or turned his face away, so her lips would land on his cheek, it grew.

She wanted to reach out and force her touch upon him, break through this fortress of ice and horror, guilt and shame that had enveloped him, but couldn’t find the strength. She didn’t have the words, after waiting for so long for him to tell her, now, she found she had nothing to press over the raw wounds that the night had left. She found herself once again waiting for Ben Solo to come back to her. Once again, not sure if he would be able to.

Ben watched the clock tick toward 6, counting down the minutes until he had to go home, and see Rey. Go home and pretend that the girl of his dreams, the love of his life, didn’t pity him, didn’t know the absolute worst about him.

Home, the home that Rey had made. He had just existed there before, but she had made him live again. Even the apartment had lost its feeling of security.

The night she had told him, he had felt himself turn numb, slowly, from the inside out. Like a shard of ice had stuck in his heart and the cold tendrils of it had slowly reached along his veins, paralysing him, freezing him.

Worrying about how she was after that awful scene, was all that had driven him home, after realising he didn’t have his phone. For himself, he would have frozen in a dark alley somewhere and been grateful for the release.

All the way home, he had wondered if she had left. He wouldn’t have been surprised, he wouldn’t have blamed her. He understood completely. If he had almost been unlovable before there was no denying it now.

And when he had entered, he had seen an image he knew would haunt him forever. Rey, asleep and peaceful, cocooned against Poe’s side. Her face was on his shoulder, and he could see how they had been sitting upright, and then, perhaps she had slowly slumped over. Poe’s arm curled protectively around her side, and he was struck for a moment, how right it looked. Maybe he could have been like Poe, in a different life, been more like his father, not been such a disappointment.

And then, Poe had told him about the hospital and the last vestige of hope had crumbled away. It made a mockery of him. His desire to tie Rey to him, to fulfil his teenage prophecy, the very thing
that he hoped would bind her to him, cement their relationship, had further cracked it, and he was forced once again to face the futility of his dreams. A real family to love, a real home. Safety.

He picked up the report on his desk that he still hadn’t signed, knowing he could put it off no longer. Holdo hadn’t been in touch, and he wasn’t sure what it meant. Everything he touched was cursed, even when he was trying to do the right thing. It was only fitting, for why should he get to walk away? Why should he get to be free?

He called the lift, and with unease ascended to Snoke’s hidden floor. Being around the old man was getting increasingly harder, as though exposure to Rey was proportionally affecting his ability to stand the darkness that curled off his former mentor like steam on hot springs, sulphurous and scorching. Even the smell, now always associated with Snoke’s domain, clinical and stale, made his stomach turn.

“Kylo Ren, my son. You have finally gathered your courage to come and see your teacher. I am honoured” Snoke’s voice was a vice around his throat.

“We need to talk about the pharma expansion” Ben said, more forcefully than he would normally speak to Snoke.

“By all means, talk” the older man narrowed his eyes at him, and leaned back, gesturing for him to continue.

“I am not happy with the information in the trials. I’ve tried to see past it, but I can’t. We cannot continue to fund the production of drugs that are basically worthless, and profit from it. I can’t. I won’t” His voice wavered toward the end. He felt pushed to a point, hot and sharp and half mad. With Holdo disappeared on him, he had no choice but to beg his tormentor to allow him to stop, to make a case for being better, from the very man who had taught him darkness in the first place.

Snoke watched him, his reptilian gaze unflinching.

“If this is about your little investigation, you don’t need to worry.” He said, sending a chill down Ben’s spine. Snoke’s lips curled vindictively.

“That little nuisance is at an end” Snoke said dismissively. Ben was lost for words, unsure what Snoke knew, if he was only guessing, or if indeed, he was exposed.

“Do you really think I would let you destroy all we have built, in a fit of morality hardly worthy of the great Kylo Ren?”

“How?” Ben finally managed.

“How is anything in this world decided, between important men, in dark rooms, while the rest of the world plugs away, unknowing. I thought you would be the man to replace me, take up the mantle of chaos I have fostered, rejoicing in watching the ripples of our dark deeds affect the world. Was I so misguided? Misled by affection?” he said, and Ben took a long, bracing breath.

“You tried, dear boy, but you have lost. It is ended.” Snoke said with such triumph in his tone, that it pushed Ben, so very close as of late, over the edge.

Anger, fear and a hundred other emotions swirled in his blood, and in a fit of rage, he turned and cleared the nearest table of its files and monitors. They crashed to the floor in a shower of sparks. He moved to another, and broke yet more, the room filling with fizzing light and the smell of burning. Amid it, he let out a shout of all the unspent feeling in his chest.
Snoke watched him, unabashed in his admiration, running his eyes fondly up and down the length of him.

“Magnificent” he murmured, and the last remaining rational fled Ben completely.

He strode toward the decrepit man in the chair and hauled him up, mindless of the cables snagging and monitors beeping. He pulled his face toward him and stared at him, expecting to see fear there, or anger, or something. But there was nothing, just a bottomless pit, no soul hidden in the depths, no sign of humanity.

“I could end it right now. I could just kill you” he snarled.

“And have it be filmed? Go to jail and be parted from our precious scavenger?” the private endearment on Snoke’s lips sent yet more rage flowing through Ben, and he lifted him higher, taking his frail weight with just one arm, as his other hand pressed into the fragile windpipe, cutting off his air.

“At least I’d be rid of you. It’d be worth it.” he murmured darkly, his eyes locked on the very ones that had haunted his dreams since he’d been a boy. Dark voices swirled in his mind, telling him to do it, liberate himself, avenge Ben Solo for the life he stole from him, avenge Han and Leia for the son they should have had, avenge Rey for the pain of losing her heart to a broken man.

“Kylo Ren!” a loud voice called, snapping Ben from his violent intent. But, he couldn’t quite stop his choking grip, couldn’t seem to send the message to his hands. His body was acting independently from his mind, seeing its revenge within sight.

“Ren!” Hux’s voice was strained, and Ben could hear him rapidly approaching them, knowing he only had seconds left to finish what he had so longed wished to do.

Hux had reached them, and was pulling on his arm, but no power on this earth could break his grip, and he barely saw the red-headed man at his side, his gaze narrowed down a dark red corridor, where he only saw the whitening of Snoke’s lips, the glaze creeping over his eyes.

“Ben Solo!! Stop this right now – Think of Rey… you’ll leave her without explanation, without justification?!” Hux said, and hearing his real name, and the mention of Rey finally broke through that darkness. He couldn’t abandon her again, even for the sake of the vengeance his soul demanded.

He let go abruptly, and Snoke dropped weakly into his chair, coughing. Hux helped him to right his cables, pushing in his breathing tube and murmured softly, shooting cautious looks at Ben over his head. Ben turned, breathing hard, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

“Stop fussing, Armitage dear boy, I am well.” Snoke said after a few moments, and Ben glanced at him to see his mentor patting Hux’s hand affectionately. The sight turned Ben’s stomach.

“I think we should leave” Hux said at length, looking meaningfully at Ben.

“I have no fear of Kylo Ren. In fact, I take it as a sign of attachment” Snoke said, and Ben looked incredulously at him.

“He always hurts the ones he loves, most of all” Snoke finished with satisfaction.

“Anyway, I am well protected here, nothing hides in this digital age and we have something further to discuss. The Organa-Solo foundation” Snoke said, seemingly to gain confidence from the startled look Ben couldn’t quell.
“What about it?”

“It has come to my attention that your mother is about to make plans for the foundation, in her absence” Snoke said, and Ben wondering how he could possibly know that, even as he worried why Leia was making those plans now.

“It is your role now, Ren, to ensure that she chooses you to take over. We will absorb the foundation into First Order, and have a sizeable tax write off”

Ben’s mind worked quickly through Snoke’s reasoning, searching for the truth. His gut whispered at him to examine is closer.

“Our leader has decided to invest more in the youth projects of the city.” Hux said suddenly, and Ben looked up to see Hux’s cheeks were flushed, even in the darkness, his pale eyes boring into Ben’s.

“Bring the children into the fold, be more hands on” Hux finished quietly.

The roaring in his ears almost blocked out all, he barely remembered approaching Snoke again, this time Hux’s strong arms holding him back. He barely remembered being pulled from the room, and shoved into the elevator. Later, he could only recall his mentor’s wheezing laughter following them along the corridor, as the numbness set in once more.

“So, what answer will you give her?” Rose asked. Rey sighed, navigating her way down a busy, shop lined street. She had started to take long walks, to get out the apartment, and try and clear her head. Leia had been on the phone again, and she was started to dodge her calls, embarrassed to tell her the truth.

“I’m going to tell her no. I can’t leave Ben right now… he’ll think it’s because of the other night. He’ll think I blame him”

“Rey, you know I like Ben, and I want him to be happy too, but you have to put yourself first at some point. This is an incredible opportunity for you, a dream come true. If you don’t follow your heart, you’ll regret it.” Rose said, and Rey frowned, glad she couldn’t see her friends face, unable to face the disappointment in it.

“Rose-“ she sighed, silently pleading for her not to say all the things Rey herself was already feeling.

“Didn’t you tell me I should give in, and see where it went? Do it for myself…” she reminded her, though knowing it wasn’t exactly what Rose had meant.
“Is this doing it for yourself? It doesn’t sound like it to me, it sounds like your sacrificing everything to try and stem the flow of a total and complete meltdown this adult man might be having. I’m a professional Rey, I know when someone needs unconditional love, and I know when someone needs therapy. The first person to give unconditional love to… is yourself.”

“You don’t understand—“

“I think I’m starting to understand more and more. He’s becoming dependent on you, he’s using you to stem his issues and avoid them—“

“Don’t analyse him by proxy, you don’t really know him”

“No, I don’t know him, you’re right. But I know you, and I’m scared for you. I know that he wants to dominate you, control you, make your decisions for you, because it gives him a sense of control that he doesn’t have in his own life, and as long as you let him, he wouldn’t ever make a stand to demand it for himself.”

“Stop” Rey muttered, as Rose’s words brought her to a standstill in the street.

“I know he wants to knock you up, marry you, do whatever he can to ensure your future attachment, to create unbreakable chains for the day when you realise that he is not changing and being with him is not making him better. And make no mistake, that day will come. When you look back over your life, and see that it was lived in service of a man, supporting and sacrificing for his happiness, regardless of your own.”

Rey couldn’t speak, her tears were dripping silently down her cheeks and off her chin.

“I love him Rose, I love him so much, I always have” she whispered brokenly.

“I know you love him, and I know you are someone who doesn’t give up on the people you love—but that’s why Rey, you can’t be a martyr to his cause, if you really love him, you won’t let him destroy you with his insecurities and issues. Save him from that. Save him from breaking the only thing he seems to care about” Rose finished roughly, and Rey could hear her calm and placid friend was upset with her, for her.

“I don’t know how to give up” Rey admitted slowly, realising how true it was.

“I know. But just… think of this…” Rose said, her voice turning tired, and Rey leaned against the wall of a store, staring at the rush of people flowing past, suddenly sure Rose was about to deliver the death blow.

“What if you are only making him worse?”

Rose hung up the phone and stared at it, frustration and sadness overwhelming her for a moment. She turned from the sink, where she’d been leaning, and froze in panic as she saw Poe, standing still as a statue in the doorway, his dark eyes trained on her with a worrying intensity.

“What the hell, Rose?” he asked slowly, as Rose wrapped her arms around her middle and set her
phone down on the table.

“What’s up? Did Finn let you in, I didn’t hear the bell” she said, deciding to brazen it out.

“I said what the hell?” Poe said, unperturbed.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough” he bit out, and Rose suddenly realised her easy-going friend looked furious.

“You were eavesdropping”

“I could hear you down the hall, you were shouting, and no wonder – when you hear that your best friend is laying down like a sacrificial virgin to some bullying-“

“Stop! You don’t know what you heard, you have no idea. Don’t take something out of context and twist it”

“I know that Rey was in the ER having a miscarriage and he was nowhere to be seen, I know she was bleeding and afraid and worried first about cleaning up the glass in her bedroom, from the massive fucking mirror he put his fists through, before he got home, so he wouldn’t be upset!” Poe shouted, and Rose didn’t know what to say, couldn’t find a justification for any of those things, except the truth, something she had no right to say, not her secrets to tell.

“She’s our friend, how can you just let her get caught up in something like this?”

“She’s our friend, but she’d also her own woman, and she can make her own decisions”

“You mean mistakes-“ Poe said.

“Whatever it turns out to be, it is her choice to make. I might not agree with her choices, but I’ll always support her right to make them” Poe turned away from Rose, anger bristling off him, and slammed a hand into the wall, making Rose jump.

“That’s not friendship” he growled accusingly, and turned frustrated, hurting eyes to her. She studied that look for a long moment.

“You can’t save her Poe. She wouldn’t want you to even try”

“Yes, I can, someone has to”

“You?”

“Yes me, damn it, if no one else will!” Poe said hotly and Rose could it all written across his face. His feelings for Rey, never quite lost, his need to protect her, to be the hero.

“She doesn’t want you, Poe. She’s in love with him” Poe looked taken aback at the words.

“In love? He’s done a number on her. Preyed on her vulnerabilities, you don’t know, the problems, issues, Rey has that a manipulative guy like that could swoop in and exploit.”

“I do know. I know all about Rey’s issues” Rose confessed, feeling terrible to be breaking Rey’s trust, but needing to head Poe off his current line of thinking. He looked surprised.

“She told you about us?” he said, studying her reactions, as Rose fought to look as neutral as possible.
“No, she told me about her. Believe it or not, Rey’s issues aren’t about you, they’re about her. She loves this guy and everything else is… working… between them.”

“I figured, given the miscarriage and all” Poe ground out, pushing his hands into his hair in frustration.

“So, Rey and my issues in bed, they were my fault?”

“I didn’t say that. They weren’t anyones fault- None is this is anyone's fault” Rose was saying, when Poe dropped his hands with a shuddering breath, and seemed to calm himself, with great effort, his anger directing inward. Then, he looked at her, and shook his head slowly.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I think it is someone’s fault. It’s his” and then, before Rose could stop him, he was walking out the door, slamming it hard behind him.

Ben pressed his hands into the desk, peering down at the duty officer.

“Try that again and spend the night in lock up” the man said curtly, before pushing back his chair and swinging his considerable bulk through the door and further into the precinct. Ben waited for the door to buzz open, pushing through the moment it did.

The policeman led him through crowded desks, and past offices, eventually arriving at the right one, and Ben bit his tongue as the man gave him a parting, dirty look before ambling away. He pushed open the ajar door, and saw Holdo, sitting tiredly at a desk that was groaning with files. If she was surprised to see him, she didn’t show it as she indicated for him to sit. He ignored it, in favour of leaning over the table, his hands braced on the lip and staring down at her.

“Is it true? Is it over?” Holdo sighed, and gestured again at the seat.

“I’m not talking about anything with you breathing down my neck, now sit, Mr Ren.” She said. He threw himself into the hard chair, never breaking his gaze with her.

“Is it true?” he asked again.

“It’s true. The investigation is over”

“How? How is it possible?”

“Because people higher up than me make these decisions, it’s out of my hands”

“It’s corruption, pure and simple, but you already know that” Ben said shortly, seeing Holdo nod reluctantly.
“Be that as it may, exposing a boys club of that magnitude… it’s above both my capabilities and my pay grade-“

“I could make it worth your while”

“No amount of money is worth your life, because, I believe that is that we are talking about here. That’s the risk” Holdo said. Ben stared at her, that numbness seemed to spread further and further into his bones.

“So, Snoke knows, I take it” she surmised. Ben nodded curtly.

“Then, you have to be careful. Seems like a good time to take Miss Nessuno and make for the hills… Europe, Asia, why not? You have the means… start again somewhere, and forget all this. The only silver lining is that you too avoid repercussions.”

“And just let him keep going, let him get away with it all, with everything” Ben said woodenly. Holdo sighed heavily, and leaned forward, bracing her arms on the desk and looking at him sympathetically.

“Look Ben, I want him to pay, just as much as you” Ben raised his eyes to hers at that moment, and the look in them make Holdo flinch.

“Ok, maybe not as much as you, but I do know, getting him isn’t worth your life. You could still have one, a normal one. Take your girl and go” Ben let out a bitter laugh at her words.

“I’ll never have a normal life, because of him… I’ll never be… ok. And he can’t just win. He can’t.” Ben whispered the last. Holdo’s heart clenched for the man sitting before her, that she suspected had a lot more to hate Snoke for than fraud and shady business dealings.

“Well, look on the bright side, maybe he’ll have an accident, or something, in fact, I’m surprised that man is still alive. Otherwise, just let it go. Live while you can” she advised, and Ben watched her closely, looking for a sign, any kind of indication of her meaning, before he pushed himself out the chair, and forced his deadened limbs to respond.

“Goodbye, Kylo Ren. Good luck” she said softly, as the door closed behind him.

Rey had almost finished her shopping and had decided to sit in a coffee shop and linger over a hot chocolate. It was raining and cold and she didn’t want to go home, to be honest. It was too quiet there, all the things she had Ben weren’t saying piling up between them, crowding her in, cutting off the air.
She felt her phone vibrate and looked down to see Poe calling. It was the second time he’d called, and she felt guilty sending it to voicemail. She couldn’t bear him asking about the miscarriage, how she was feeling, all with an unbearable sensitivity. It was childish and petulant but she just couldn’t stand his sympathy now. Her phone lit up a second time, and she scowled down at it, wondering if there was something wrong, and maybe she should answer, and was surprised to see Ben’s name. He hadn’t called her since that night. He used to call all the time, checking in during the day, just to say his loved her, or missed her. But since that night, that same insufferable silence.

“Hello?”

“Rey, are you home?” he asked, and she could hear in his tone, that something was wrong.

“No, I’m out. Why?”

“I – I’d like to see you… I think I need to see you – if you want to see me” he said haltingly.

“Of course, I always want to see you… I can be back in a little bit, but I’m supposed to be meeting Jess tonight, remember…”

“Can you cancel?” he asked suddenly, and Rey bit her lip. The last thing she wanted to do was go out, if Ben was finally coming around to speaking to her again, if they could still salvage their relationship, but her conversation with Rose wouldn’t stop replaying in her head.

“It’s late notice…” she muttered.

“Please… I just need you – I need you to stay with me… please, just tonight” he said solemnly, and Rey found herself nodding, before she could stop it.

“Ok. I’ll see you soon” Rey said. There was a long pause, so long she thought he had hung up, before he suddenly spoke again, so quietly she could barely hear him.

“I love you, Rey.”

“I know, I love you too” she said simply, and then, he was gone.

Ben prowled the apartment like a caged beast in a pen, back and forth over the same steps, again and again, waiting for Rey to return. The numbness in his limbs, in his heart was fading, and in their place, was a white, hot anger, a need to hurt and destroy. He thought about going into the dojo and trying to work it out, and he didn’t want to work himself into a rage, just in time for Rey coming home. She’d been through enough, because of him, he reminded himself.

The tortuous thoughts he was usually able to escape were pressing him into the ground, he felt
buried under their weight. He was an animal backed into a corner, with nowhere to escape, nothing
left to hide behind, and he wondered if it was making him a little mad. Maybe he had been mad
this whole time, he thought wildly, maybe it had finally happened.

A knock sounded at the door, and he stiffened, wondering why Rey would be knocking. He strode
to the door, and pulled it roughly back, rearing back in surprise as he saw an unwelcome sight
there, Poe Dameron, scowling at him.

“Where’s Rey?” Poe said immediately, and Ben stiffened over his presumptuous tone.

“Not home” he said shortly, as Poe crossed his arms across his chest, settling an aggressive stance
that sent Ben’s back up.

“Really? Mind if I check?” Poe said, and shouldered past him, into the apartment. Ben stared at
him in shock, fighting the urge to chase after him and throw him back out.

“Suit yourself” he said, watching him closely as he walked door to door, peering into rooms.

“Remind why I would lie?” Ben asked at length, tiring of the angry looks Poe kept throwing at
him.

“Maybe because you want to keep us apart, isolate her from the people who love her”

“I’m one of those people” Ben argued, breathing deeply to keep his anger down. It was moving in
his chest, steadily building, an entity separate from him, with a will of its own. Poe finished his
inspection, with an unconcealed snort at Rey’s art studio.

“Nice, if you’re going to keep someone prisoner, might as well make the cage comfortable” he
said.

“Excuse me?”

“No” Poe said flatly, stopping his search and rounding on Ben in the hall.

“What?” Ben asked, feeling like he was playing catch up in this conversation, and could barely
concentrate when controlling his rage was taking up so much of his attention.

“I don’t excuse you. I don’t excuse you for forcing my friend, my ex – who I still care about
deeply, into some kind of weird, power-trip relationship to nurture your troubled soul” Poe said,
and Ben froze at his words.

“What would you know about it?” he practically growled.

“More than you’d think” Poe said quickly, and Ben struggled with the new knowledge that she had
talked about their relationship with Poe.

“I don’t excuse you for getting her pregnant 3 months after getting together, when she is so
inexperienced, I don’t excuse you for leaving her alone to lose the baby” Poe was crowding in on
him, and it took everything Ben had not to knock him back.

“You think I didn’t want to be there, that I don’t hate myself for not being there”

“Not enough, apparently. No, I think you’re the kind of guy that thinks too much of himself to
consider he might have done something wrong, to feel responsible” Poe accused, and Ben could
only let out a hollow laugh.
“You have no idea what you’re talking about”

“Don’t I?? I certainly don’t excuse you for taking away her dreams, and refusing her permission to follow her them”

“What are you talking about??” Ben demanded.

“I’m talking about Art Therapy and Italy, a chance of a lifetime.”

“What?” Ben breathed, his confusion clearly showing on his face, as Poe watched him realise.

“You know, if your own girlfriend is too scared to tell you she’s been offered her dream opportunity, then you probably need to re-evaluate your relationship.” Poe sneered, and Ben stepped around him, going to the window, hoping the feeling of space would help him calm down.

He could feel Poe approaching him from behind, and felt almost dizzy for a moment. Italy, Art Therapy, Rey. His uncle’s face rose in his head, making bile rise in his throat for a moment, and he choked it back. Rey was leaving him, she knew everything and she blamed him and now, she was leaving him. He would be alone, with Snoke and First Order, and one day, his mother’s foundation, the responsibility of all those vulnerable children, children like Rey had been, with only him standing between them and Snoke.

Poe’s hand landed roughly on his shoulder, pulling him around, and he stiffened instinctively.

“Don’t” he warned in a growl. Poe’s hand was heavy, and unmistakeably male, and it sparked something in Ben, so primal and old, he couldn’t recognise his own eyes as he caught sight of them in the glass.

“Don’t touch me, I’m warning you.” He said, his voice was thick with violence, and no amount of deep breathing was making it subside. There was a commotion in his head that was threatening to block everything else out. It was like someone screaming in his ear.

“I’m talking to you buddy-“ Poe started, but the voice was far away, and Ben pushed his hands away, his own arms numbed to all feeling, but it must have been hard, because Poe stumbled right back, into the edge of the chair. His face twisted with anger, and Ben opened his mouth, tried to find words.

“You need to get out of here, now.” He managed, before Poe was before him, and shoving him by the shoulders. Ben swayed back a little, the need to fight, to protect himself was pounding in his ears, and before he could stop himself, he grabbed Poe by the upper arms and pushed him back again, bore him easily across the apartment and slammed him into the front door, hard.

“Get out!” he roared into his face, before leaning away. Poe barely hesitated before drawing back his fist and letting it fly across Ben’s cheek. His head snapped to the side, his teeth clicking and pulse rushing to the point of contact.

“You’re a fucking animal, there’s something wrong with you. I’m not letting Rey stay here one more minute” Poe said. Ben turned back to Poe, his brown eyes alive with darkness.

“You’ll not let her? She isn’t yours to command”

“She isn’t yours either… she could never be yours… she feels sorry for you, I heard her tell Rose, she’s scared of what you’ll do if she breaks up with you-“ Poe said, and that thing that had been building and building inside him, erupted.
Ben lashed out, his hand, faster than the eye, sending Poe’s head falling backward with the swift viciousness of the punch. Poe leaned on his knees, and Ben saw blood coursing from his nose, swore, and stood up, launching himself at Ben.

They went down together, knocking into the stools of the breakfast bar, the room filling with the noise of brutal, ugly fighting, rasped breaths and skin on skin. Ben was barely capable of conscious thought, his gaze narrowed to the fight, to the instinct of movement, to his training, anticipating moves and countering them, delivering retribution when they failed.

Gradually, Poe’s punches became weaker, as Ben felt his own breath start to fail him. The madness and thirst for blood drove him on, until he slowly realised that Poe was no longer returning his blows, but simply holding onto his arms weakly, his face a mask of blood.

Ben’s chest was heaving, and he looked around in horror, to see the kitchen floor, a swirl of blood and boot marks. His own hands were torn and swollen, and he could feel his face starting to puff up, but he could still see, despite the blood dripping into his eyes. He looked to Poe, and saw him trying to pull himself up, his arms failing and falling backwards, and a piercing, lead weight fell through him. What had he done?

“Poe?” he croaked out, forcing himself on bruised knees to approach the figure on the floor.

He was still trying to make his jelly-like limbs work, when he heard the code being tapped into the door, and saw Rey stepping into the apartment.

“Ok, I bought way too much food, and just know now, I intend on eating it all—” she was saying, pulling earbuds out, her eyes on her bags, before she looked up, and an expression of horror appearing across her face as she took in the tableau.

“Ben?” she gasped, and knew he’d never forget the accusation and disgust in it. She seemed frozen to the spot, as she looked at them, Poe on his back in a pool of blood, and Ben, on his knees beside him, his face dripping with it.

“Call 911” he rasped.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for your response to the last chapter.

I hope I’m not bombarding you with these updates, just the end of this part is happening, and I’m just trying to keep up!

On that note, this is not betaed as always, but might be worse because of pace of updating, apologies in advance.

If you're enjoying this pain train... let me know your thoughts!

One more chapter of Act 3 left to go - Hopes? Predictions? Fears? Prayer circle?
Rey had sat beside Poe in the ambulance, unable to tear her eyes from him, willing him to wake up. That scene in the kitchen when she’d walked in had been all her worst nightmares combined. Ben losing all reason, pushed over the edge of sanity. Someone else being hurt because of her. Rose’s soft insistent words – *What if you are making him worse?*

She felt every emotion there was, in a hot florid torrent. It pushed her on as they arrived at the hospital and got out, as they pushed Poe away through the double doors on the ER and told Rey to wait outside. She paced behind the chairs.

There was fear, for Poe most of all, and in part for Ben. There was anger at them both, for losing control, and she had seen Ben’s damage. They seemed to have ripped into each other, without fear of consequence. Then there was the guilt, the guilt was heaviest of all, selfishly. Guilt that Poe was hurt because of her. No matter what had driven him there, he wouldn’t be there, if not for her, that was certain. And then the guilt of Ben. She had pushed him too far, taken away his right to tell her his secrets in his own time, and he was spiralling madly. Even then, she had known, had seen him drowning, and been powerless to help. She had been naïve, in everything, she realised now. She had thought she could fix it, that she could fix him. She had underestimated all of it. She had thought it would be easy, had over-simplified everything and only now could see the repercussions of that.

“Ben” she called, seeing him come through the doors, a nurse showing him to the seating area. He looked terrible, covered in blood and bruises, his face swelling, and the expression on his face, haunted. He stopped short when he saw her, the last remaining blood seeming to drain from his face as he watched her. The look he gave her was part devastation, part tearing guilt and the rest fear and anger.

He stood stock still, radiating dark energy and the nurse left him, with a grateful glance behind. Rey took a few halting steps toward him, before seeing how her reluctance was making his hurt hands, tremble a little more.

She closed the gap between them, and touched his shoulder, reaching up high to press a soft touch to the immoveable statue he had become.

“Ben, are you alright” He looked down at her, and she met his gaze unflinchingly.

“Is that really what you want to say to me?” he asked roughly.
“How’s your friend?” he asked roughly, and she could see how worried he was for a moment, before his expression turned impassive again.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure yet” she said, unable to even finish the sentence.

“Just say it Rey, let’s not pretend” he said, her heartbroken expression pressing him back into anger, his only rebuttal.

“Ben, don’t. We shouldn’t talk about any of this now” she said, attempting to slide her arm around his middle. What could even be said? That she loved him beyond reason, that she would forgive him anything, if only it hadn’t hurt someone else. If only she had been his only victim. She, who had walked willingly into his dark domain, with her eyes wide open.

“Why not? I doubt time will change the things you have to say, so just say them, say them!” his voice raised toward the end, and the sound drew looks from nearby people. Rey realised once again, she had seriously misjudged things. Ben had not hit bottom, he was still spiralling.

“Stop it, let’s go outside and talk” she suggested.

“Are you sure you feel safe with me?” he said, with a look of pure vulnerability, even under his hostile words. Without replying, she turned and headed for the doors, without looking to see if Ben was following.

Outside she walked a little way into the car park, drawing cool air into her lungs, trying to keep her composure and prevent the warring emotions inside her from spilling out. She turned to find Ben approaching. She felt her phone vibrate, and checked it quickly.

“Finn and Rose are on their way” she said.

“Great, more naysayers to whisper in your ear, and convince you that I’m the devil in disguise” he said bitterly.

“They just worry.”

“Believe me, I know all about their fears, thanks to Dameron. How you pity me, how you are afraid to leave me, though you want to, in case I lose it. Little late for that” he laughed darkly, and Rey frowned, feeling sick at his words.

“Ben, I don’t pity you”

“Please, Rey, don’t lie to me right now, I don’t think I could survive it.”

“I’m not. Sympathising with someone is different from pitying them.” And she would know, as a childhood scavenger she had hated to see people look down on her, feel sorry for her.

“Poor, broken Ben, in need of sympathy and love. Is that why you’re here, is that why you came to me, gave yourself to me… like some kind of noble sacrifice?” he asked, his voice turning hoarse on the last word.

“No, and you know it isn’t. I came to you because I love you” She said, and refused to budge an inch when he swooped closer to her, his face close to hers.

“Love. I think we might have different definitions of it” he said, searching her face a long moment, before turning from her to stare out at the city street.
“What does that mean?”

“I’m pretty sure, if you love someone, you don’t move a world away. If you love someone, it follows that you’d want to see them, or at least be on the same continent” Rey let out a long exhale. Another thing to feel guilty for, that she’d kept it from him, and he had found out in the worst possible way.

“What did Poe tell you?”

“Enough”

“I wanted to tell you-“

“But you couldn’t right, you couldn’t because you were scared of what I’d do” he said it with such bitterness, she realised it wasn’t her he was angry at, it was himself.

“Don’t anger the mad dog on a leash, or else…” he said, looking down at his torn-up hands, and slowly flexing them, making new blood well out the virgin scabs.

“Stop, Ben, stop hurting yourself” she snapped, stepping close and grabbing the one closest to her, holding him firm, though it must have hurt even more.

“It’s what I do, Rey, haven’t you heard. I hurt people. It’s my legacy. Are you done with me now?” he said, changing subject suddenly, and Rey struggled to keep up.

“What? Why would you ask that?”

“Was this it, was this enough?” he said, gesturing to the hospital looming behind them, reminding Rey constantly about Poe, somewhere inside.

“Stop, stop saying all these things”

“I’m just asking what your friends will be soon, you need to have an answer ready” he bit out, and she shied away from his resentment as his eyes scanned the street for a sign of Finn and Rose.

“Well?” he suddenly pressed, whirling back to Rey, yo-yoing between anger and fear, desperation and remorse.

“I – I don’t know” she admitted, and saw those words take the wind from him. His breath stuttered, he seemed to sag a little, before straightening up, and fixing her with an impassive look, his Kylo Ren mask in place for the first time in months.

“Well you need to decide. And, know this, if you still want to try, if you still haven’t written me off, your friends will try and make you. If they hated me before, they won’t rest now, until we are separated.” He was saying, as Rey started to shake her head, denials springing to her lips.

“You know it’s true. They will not accept us together, that time has passed. If you want to – be with me – still, you can’t talk to them about our relationship, about me, at all. In fact, it’d probably be better if you didn’t see them, it would make it easier”

Rey stared at him with a feeling of sadness, greater than she had ever experienced.

“So, you’re telling me if we are still together, then I can’t see my friends anymore?” she asked numbly. She knew he was acting out of fear. She knew it, and she hated that it controlled him so completely, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to obey one more time.
“I’m explaining why it would be difficult, and I’m not telling you, I’m asking you not to” he said quietly, and her heart broke a little further.

“Unless you would prefer me to tell you, order you, if that would make it easier- to justify to yourself” he continued and there it was. The line in the proverbial sand, the one that she couldn’t cross.

“Ben – please… don’t go this way” she implored quietly. He stared at her, his intense look turning angry.

“Don’t go where I can’t follow” she said, and he turned away, his hands clenched into fists.

“You mean where you don’t want to follow”

“No, I really mean I can’t. It’s impossible. I’ve tried to bend, but I can only bend so far, before I break in half. Please don’t make me choose… Ben. Please” he watched her with hunted eyes, with a sadness impossible to fathom.

“It sounds like you already have” he said finally, and turned toward the hospital, walking away without looking back even once.

After a long crying jag in a poorly lit hospital toilet, staring at the sink soap scum pooling in the sink, Rey went to meet Finn and Rose. They barely spoke, only sat together in a family waiting room for word of their friend in silence. Rey was cut off, guilty and sick. After about half an hour, she felt Rose linger near her, and she looked up to see her friends tear-stained face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know he was there and –“ she started, and Rey felt fresh guilt press down. That her loving and concerned friend blamed herself for part of this made Rey sick. The number of people affected and hurt was expanding every day.

“Don’t – keep the blame where it belongs…” Rey whispered, squeezing her hand.

“That’s good advice. And since I see you two seem to be competing in some kind of contest about who can feel worse, usually it’s the people involved in the fight who are responsible” Finn huffed, as he came and sat next to Rey, and pulled Rose down on his other side, wrapping a warm, protective arm around both their shoulders.

A knocked sounded at the door, and they all looked up at a young doctor entering the room.

“Are you here for Poe Dameron?”

“Yes” they all rushed out, but fell back for Rose to take the lead.

“He’s stable, we had to do some scans to see what was going on, but it seems like a good prognosis so far, a serious concussion, internal swelling, which should start to go down, and when it does,
he’ll wake up.”

“So – he’s going to be ok?”

“I can’t guarantee it, but everything we have observed so far points to a concussion, and now, he’s healing, his body taking a rest to recover”

“Can we see him?”

“He’s just being moved, give him half an hour to get situated, and you can go in, briefly, though, there isn’t really anything you can do at this stage” the doctor said, not unkindly, before sweeping out the door again.

“In English?” Finn demanded, his eyes seeking his girlfriends and the only advice he trusted.

“He’s going to be fine” Rose said with a relieved smile, and Finn beamed at them both, as Rey realised how worried he had been, hidden as it was.

“That deserves celebratory coffee I think. I’ll be back, ladies” Finn said, disappearing out the door, and Rose turned her smile on Rey, and hugged her.

The weight of relief was so great, Rey felt as though balloons had been tied to her shoulders and she might float away.

They pulled back, and slumped back into their chairs, the exhaustion of worry suddenly unavoidable.

“How’s Ben?” Rose asked, and Rey could barely bring herself to look at her. She shrugged lightly.

“Rey... you should go home. We’ve got this covered, and Poe isn’t going to wake up tonight anyway”

“You need to get some proper sleep” Rose continued gently.

Rey didn’t know what to say, couldn’t find words to express her heavy heart

“What I mean is... you need to go home” Rose clarified.

“I should stay, in case he needs something” Rey objected.

“Rey, I don’t know if you remember, but Poe wasn’t the only one getting stitched up in here tonight. You should check on Ben”

“I’m not sure he wants to see me” Rey said honestly.

“That’s because you both want to avoid talking. You should see him, face to face. You two have some stuff to work out” Rose reminded her and Rey let out a long sigh. She bit her lip, suddenly feeling it tremble. Unbidden, and a hot tear dashed down her cheek.

“I don’t know what to say to him” she said quietly, feeling guilt press down harder and harder on her chest, making it difficult to breath. Going home and seeing Ben meant confronting everything that had happened to them in the last week, and she didn’t think she could handle it yet.

“Maybe you do, and that’s why you don’t want to go” Rose said, and reached out suddenly and enveloped her hand in hers, squeezing hard.
“I think you’re right. It’s not helping… I’m not helping. I’m only making it worse.” Rose thought about it long moment, and nodded sympathetically.

“Maybe he needs to get worse, before he can get better.” She said. It cut Rey in two, to think of Ben getting worse, alone, with no one by his side.

“It’ll be ok, whatever happens, you have us” Rose said, and Rey wondered who Ben would have, breaking her heart all over again.

“Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss. The abyss gazes also into you.”

*Nietzsche*

When he returned home alone, the smell of blood and violence greeting him as he opened the door, he had turned the infamous Nietzsche phrase over and over in his mind, as it fought to break through the fog of his dulled mind. He had been in a cab, looking out at the darkened streets, remembering when Snoke had convinced him to cut his grieving mother out of his life.

His reflection in the window pane, was pale and mottled with bruises and swelling, and in the moonlight, he had seen the man he was to become. Twisted and cruel, desperate and controlling.

There had been a bright and flickering moment when he had thought, maybe it’d be enough, having her. But, he had failed to account for himself. He remained the same broken shell of a person, barely a man, hardly a beast. He was a man who thought love mean control and domination, because it was all he had known. And he had tried to treat Rey in the same way. Followed in his
teachers’ footsteps.

The realisation had sickened him.

After that realisation, driven by grief and anger, he had slowly, and almost methodically destroyed his apartment. Going room to room, letting the rage well up and overflow, he had broken chairs and smashed screens. Pieces of broken glass and crockery littered every surface, the walls held dents where he had unleashed his training staff on them. Bed linens torn in half. Water spilled out the cracked sink.

The only untouched room was the studio. He hadn’t dared to open that door, couldn’t go inside and feel her absence once more.

Then, he had sunk down in the wreckage of his life, his mind blank, his heart empty, his head was finally quiet, and waited.

He was still there when she found him, awaiting judgement with a bowed head. He had no idea how long had passed, not even aware of the time slipping away, in fact he had savoured it, because in that small time, Rey hadn’t yet left him, and he knew, soon, he would no longer be able to comfort himself with that fact.

When he closed his eyes, all he could see were Rey’s tear stained eyes, wide and hurt, her trembling fingers. The pallid colour the hospital lights shone on her skin and the awful way her lips had seemed bloodless, after her miscarriage. After their miscarriage. Image after image of trauma, where before had only existed good things.

Rey in her flowery dress at graduation, blowing out her birthday candles, dancing with him at his mother’s gala. All these slipped away to be replaced with the accusation on her face when she opened the door and saw him crouched over Poe. Her soft words _I know everything_ crawling under her skin and taking root, growing new insecurities and vulnerabilities in the blighted soil of his soul.

“Ben?” a voice said from the door, and he looked up in confusion at the woman standing in the doorway, stepping inside and unwinding her heavy coats, hanging them up, with only the lightest tut at the mess around him. He stared at the coat she’d hung up, white and fluffy, a coat from his memories.

Leia walked steadily over to him, without any sign that her presence was breaking his heart wide open. She looked 10 years younger in the moonlight from the window, and, when she touched his hands, he felt for a heartbeat that he was still that boy, who was waiting on the ice for his mother to come and pick him up.

“Mom?” he asked, so lost in his emotions, that he barely realised that it was the first time he’d called her that in more years than he could remember. Leia smiled gently, stroking his hair, and he let out a shaky breath at the comfort the forgotten touch brought.

“Rey called me. She was worried… she loves you so” Leia explained. Ben shut his eyes, and felt a long, hot tear drip from his eye, and tried to turn his face away. He was a grown man, crying in front of his mother. His shame grew, and yet, there was something about her touch, her loving look, that seemed to absolve him from embarrassment or judgement.

“I’ve ruined everything, beyond salvaging. The only thing that ever mattered to me-“ he broke off, feeling another tear on his cheek, with another chasing behind. He was crying, in his mother’s arms. He tried to imagine what Snoke would say, the scathing, shameful things, and yet, there in
Leia’s embrace, he couldn’t hear his teacher's voice, couldn’t even imagine it.

“Oh, Ben, my boy... nothing is ever ruined completely... we can still fix it” she said confidently, and he let out a breath, and when her arms went around his shoulders, he let himself lean against her. The relief was a weight off his weary soul.

“I know what I have to do, but I don’t know if I have the strength to do it. Will you help me?” he whispered.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello all.... thank you so much for your response to the last chapter I was blown away.

This update has taken me ages, sorry - because I kind of wrote the last three chapters all in one big go. So... while this isn't long, the other parts are just being edited.

I love hearing the discussion of Ben and Rey's relationship in the comments, and feel honoured that people are invested and care about them in this story.

I struggled with this, because, while I love Ben/Kylo/Adam - I love Rey too... I wanted Ben here to capture the same feeling of post fight, throne room scene... like... so close, and then... ruins everything.

Rey put so much trust in him, took a huge chance on him, and he wasn't ready... that's for movie 9, hopefully))) Or, in Cure for Loneliness - part 4))

If you enjoyed reading this, let me know! xoxoxox
I would do anything for love, but I won't do that

Chapter Notes

I'd do anything for love (but I won't do that) - Meat Loaf

video that inspires the Ben/Rey scene

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrOBv206VVA

By tatraas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Here” the smell of coffee woke her from her anxious dreams, where she had always been searching, looking for someone in the dark. She blinked up at her friend, before extending a hand for the paper cup.

“Thanks” she said groggily, before blinking in the artificial brightness of the room, and was surprised to see sun sinking in the sky outside the window.

“What time is it?” she asked Finn, completely out of sync.

“About 4pm, you were really out of it” Finn said. Rey bit down her alarm at how time had slipped away. The had gotten in to see Poe at about 7am, and then, she had sat with him a while, as Finn had taken Rose home, before she had to get ready for work. When Finn had come back, Rey had known she’d have to go home, and she’d sat down for a minute by the door, and Poe had chosen that time to wake up. She hadn’t been able to leave after that, talking to him, explaining he was in the hospital and bit by bit, his confusion had faded and then, he’d fallen back asleep, and Rey had closed her eyes for just a moment. Now, it was 4pm, and she had been asleep for hours, scrunching up the upright, wooden chair under the window, the rough blind cutting patterns into her cheek.

“Yeah, I guess the last few days are catching up to me” she said bleakly.

“You’ve been through a lot” Finn said, opening the bag he’d brought and pulling out a donut for her. She wrinkled her nose, and looked at Poe.

“Do you think Poe will press charges?” she asked Finn, worried for Ben, and then guilty for it at the same time.

“It seemed kind of reciprocal to me, given Ben was pretty banged up. Probably best to just… both walk away” Finn said, pushing the tray back with a disappointed sigh.

“He looks so terrible” Rey said, taking in his bruised face in the day light, and they both jumped as Poe’s rasping voice came from across the room.

“Hey, you should see the other guy” he said.

“My man, glad to see your sense of humour is still intact, although, I have to warn you, it’s about
the only thing that is. You might want to steer clear of reflective surfaces for a while – wait, does that mean I’m the handsome one now?” Finn was saying as Rey reached Poe’s other side and gingerly gave him a hug. His bruised and battered face was a collage of purple and green, with a good amount of swelling thrown in. He managed a small grimace, wincing as it pulled on his split lip.

“Hi again” she said in a small voice.

“Hey” he replied, and Finn cleared his throat after a long moment.

“I think I’ll go see if I can find something Rey will actually eat. Be good you two – no fighting” he said, in a mock stern tone, before disappearing out the day.

Rey lowered herself hesitantly onto the chair beside Poe’s bedside, and watched him carefully.

“Poe… I’m so sorry.” She said, finding the tears running down her face once again.

“Sorry? Damn, I seemed to remember a pretty hulking, built guy doing this damage… but it was you? Hell Rey, lay off the spinach” he joked lamely, and Rey laughed through her tears at his attempt to lighten the mood.

“You know what I mean – I’m sorry you were even there in the first place… it’s my fault”

“Did you ask me to come over?”

“No… but you know what I mean. If not for me, you wouldn’t be lying here, you can’t deny that”

“No, I can’t deny that. However, I can dispute that it is your fault… blame needs to lie with the two fools who let their hot-heads get the better of them” Poe said, looking up at the ceiling and blowing out a long breath.

“I’ve had a bit of time to think about this… and yeah, your boyfriend might actually be insane, and have way too short a fuse, but, I didn’t do myself any favours. Where is he?” he asked warily.

“Home… he wasn’t admitted, just patched up” she said, and Poe scrunched his face.

“Hell, you couldn’t pretend I’d put more of a dent in him? Quite the ego blow” Rey swallowed hard, thinking of Ben’s mainly superficial injuries compared to Poe’s.

“Rey, stop… I gave back, don’t think that I didn’t. I just didn’t count on Solo being an actual machine, figures, didn’t you two meet in martial arts class or something?” he continued, and Rey pushed her tears down, to nod at him.

“Well, on the bright side, if he ever tires of finance, he could always don a cape and mask and clean up this city” Poe said, and impulsively reached her hand out and wrapped her fingers around Poe’s.

“I’m so relieved you’re ok…I just couldn’t… the thought that you have been hurt because of me. I never thought that anyone else would get hurt. It was only supposed to be me.”

“Oh Rey” Poe said, his dark eyes filling with worry for her.

“I mean, emotionally” she reassured him.

“That doesn’t make it better” he said softly.
“I know” Rey admitted.

“You two have some stuff to work out, and I’m not getting involved, better late than never. Rose did tell me not to-“ Poe bit off and looked away, seeming angry with himself.

“You were just trying to help”

“I was just trying to rescue you, always the hero, the cost be damned.” He said a little bitterly, and Rey stroked his arm soothingly.

“You’re a good guy, that’s what the good guys do”

“Maybe… or maybe I was being selfish – maybe the thought of you and him just made me a little crazy for a second” Poe said, and Rey wondered how to respond, when the door opened, admitting Rose and Finn.

“Look who I found wandering the halls!” Finn said, clutching Rose to him, and Rey marvelled that her feisty little friend had managed a whole day of work, as she had snoozed in the window.

“I come bearing actual food” Rose said, flashing a subway bag that mad Poe struggle to sit up straighter.

“Foot long?”

“Of course”

“Meatball?”

“What else?”

Rey stood slowly, and looked at her friends, delving into the food, smiling, relieved after the ordeal and knew she couldn’t put it off anymore.

It was time to go home.

His fingers moved over the canvas, the sensation of creating, of feeling emotions too complex and terrifying to contain, flowing from the ends of his fingers, instead of curdling in his chest was oddly restful.

The silence of the empty apartment was complete and he worked without fear of discovery. All
afternoon, with the only interruption a phone call from a long-forgotten ghost. A ghost whose voice had pulled him to that room, full of familiar, comforting smells, of oils and turps and her. He had lingered in the studio, to feel closer to Rey, and sat in her chair, regarding the blank canvas stretch out before him. Without really thinking about it, he’d reached for charcoal, and put it to the pristine surface. For the first time in nearly a decade. It had instantly soothed his raging feelings, and then, hours had passed unheeded, his mind completely occupied. It was relaxing, without thought. There was only the black and white of his pictures, and he was grateful for the respite from feeling.

He finished as the sun started to drop, and wiped his hands, placing the canvases he’d filled against the wall, hidden from view. He had just finished, when he heard the sound of the apartment door opening, echoing down the quiet hall.

“Ben?” his heart dropped to hear her hesitation, her fear. Rey sounded afraid. Rey sounded afraid of him. He heard her footsteps echoing in the barren apartment. His mother had arranged a clean-up of the apartment, and it was positively bare, as bare as the canvas he’d been pulled to on Rey’s easel.

When he appeared, he saw a look of relief on her face. It was then he realised, she sounded afraid for him, and his heart broke all over again at her enduring kindness.

“Ben, are you ok?” she asked, she looked around the place where they had so briefly made a home, together.

“What happened here?” she asked shortly, before shaking her head.

“It doesn’t matter, as long as you’re ok?” it sounded like a question, and he didn’t really know how to answer it.

“I’ll live” he managed, and realised that was the only thing he was sure of, at this moment. She looked so tired.

His girl, the light of his life, barely glowing, struggling to stay alight. He approached her, and she seemed to relax the closer and closer he came. He leaned against the kitchen island beside her and she stepped hesitantly closer and ran her fingers gently over the cuts on his hands, the partially healed scab forced open during his bout of destruction, and a stitch here and there ripped, her hazel eyes sad.

“You have to take better care of yourself” she said slowly. His eyes shot to hers, and his heart squeezed with panic and fear, despite knowing it was inevitable.

“Promise me” she said quietly, holding his hand now, staring up with him clear, tear filled eyes.

“You have to promise Ben, please” she had said, a sob catching in her throat, and he thought to himself that if that involuntary sound of anguish never again passed Rey’s lips, it would all be worth it.

“How is he?” he asked, unable not to. Rey smiled a half smile.

“He’s awake, he’s going to be alright” he took a deep grateful breath.

“I’m sorry, for what it’s worth” he said.

“It’s worth a lot.” Rey said, giving him another of those little smiles, that he wished he could tuck away and keep forever close to his heart.
They stared at each other, and slowly, all those things that had been piling up in the silence of the last week, growing like a cancer, threatened to choke him.

“I’m sorry too… for everything” she started and he raised a finger, and lightly lay it across her lips.

“Don’t. Don’t ever apologise, for giving me a chance.” His finger brushed the petal soft skin there, and then went to her ear, tucking her hair behind it, before reluctantly dropping to his side.

After what felt like an eternity, she spoke again, sounding lost.

“What do we do now?” she asked, and he felt a surge of love, so blinding and pure, it might have been made from pure light. Rey loved him, even now, she found it impossible to give up on it. Rey was a fighter, and she had tried to fight for him, and giving up was not something that came easily to her. It gave him strength to reach out for her face again, and when she didn’t flinch away, he ran this thumb over the apple of her cheek.

“What we have to” he said, and Rey shook her head slightly, her eyes squeezing shut, as though she couldn’t bear to look at him.

“No” she muttered, and dropped her head down, hiding her beautiful face from him.

“Yes, Rey”

“No… Not yet – not yet” she insisted quietly.

“We have to… before -” he said, lifting her chin up to see her, her solemn dark eyes making it hard to finish.

“Before I break your love for me” he confessed selfishly. It was selfish, to want someone to still love him, somewhere in the world. For someone to smile fondly, if fleetingly, at the thought of his name. He knew he didn’t deserve it, especially not from her, but he wanted it anyway.

“You can’t say you didn’t warn me, right? At the grand old age of 18, you called all of this… and I didn’t believe you, I thought I could save you” she confessed in a choked voice.

“But, Ben… I believe you now. I believe you” she said. It wasn’t much, but it was something. Maybe there would be one light memory in the sea of darkness that had been their time together.

“Not everyone can be saved, Rey. But thank you for trying. Thank you for believing I could change.” He said hoarsely.

“You can still change… Ben. I still believe in you. You’re stronger than you realise.”

“I’m not the strong one here, that’s always been you, kid. Anyway, it’s not your problem anymore, I’m not your problem anymore” he said, seeing the old endearment pulled an involuntary expression to Rey’s face, and for a moment, they were teenagers standing in a school hallway, and she was frowning up at him Don’t call me kid. Those memories were more precious to him than anything he owned.

“You need to go” he said bleakly.

Rey suddenly leaned forward and caught his hands, the cuts there stinging as she touched them.

“Let me fix these first, please” she asked, and he couldn’t help but nod. To be cared for by her one last time, it was too alluring to refuse. They stood slowly, stiff and aged under the weight of the
past week. In their room, Rey looked at the bed, completely bare, just a white square in the twilight. She guided him down, and went into the bathroom, rummaging around in there, before coming back with supplies.

“Do you remember the first time you did this for me?” he couldn’t stop himself from asking. The faintest shadow of a grin touched her lips, as she concentrated on his hands.

“I was so afraid you’d find me there” she sighed.

“It’s the only Christmas eve I remember in that house” Ben mused.

“Well, putting your hand through a picture is pretty memorable”

“So were you” he said. She finished his hands in silence, and then, went back to the bathroom, putting everything away neatly.

She returned, and stood before him silently, and before Ben could stop her, pulled her top over her head, and slid down her jeans. She had started before she had taken her shoes off, and now, she was stuck trying to take them off, ankles locked tight with pooled denim.

She stilled as he went to his knees before her, carefully lifting one foot, then the other, slipping her shoes off, and placing them to the side with careful precision, before turning back to the prison of her jeans. He worked the bunched fabric off her ankles and then, she sat down on the bed as he pulled them the rest of the way off. Naked, Rey lay and watched him shed his own clothes, mindless of the countless cuts and scrapes, bound ribs on the right side and stitches along his cheek.

“Will you just – hold me?” she asked.

He went forward and touched her knees, running his hands up her legs silently, pressing a kiss onto her knee, before Rey reached her hand out for his. She pulled him onto the mattress beside her, wiggling them both so they were face to face, skin on skin. Her hands returned to his jaw, holding him near her, captured in her palms, her eyes on his.

Their shared gazes never broke, except to press soft kisses against pooling tears. Ben rubbed his nose into Rey’s hair, and drew a lungful of her, trying to make it last, trying to capture it. She ran her fingertips over his lips again and again, before pressing her lips there instead.

It was sad and intimate and final and he knew he would never forget her quiet urgency, her intense eyes and heart-breaking expression. For a long time, she lay in her spot on his shoulder, her ear over his heart, and he did everything he could to memorise the feel of her skin against his, the weight of her leg, hooked over his knee.

“I don’t think I can do it – “ she said suddenly, and he felt her tremble.

“Do you want me to help you?” he asked carefully, unsure if he was damning himself further, only knowing he’d do anything he had to, to spare her pain. She looked over at him, pale and wan, every red tear mark another tally of sins on his soul. Then, she nodded slowly.

They lay side by side, not touching now, stealing themselves for the next part. At length Rey sat up, and he knew she would be first. She had always been stronger than him.

She put her clothes back on, and he tucked away every last glimpse he was afforded of her breathtaking body, knowing it was his last.

“Ben?” she asked, as he sat up and leaned against the headboard, his tired body feeling the strains
on it again, now the anaesthesia of Rey’s proximity was fading.

“Please” she muttered quietly, as he struggled with his words. He swallowed hard, and pushed the words out his mouth.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked curtly, and a look of utter relief cross her face, twined with disappointment.

“Back to the hospital” she said.

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I don’t want you going there again. In fact, I don’t want you to see him again, or any of those people” he said quietly, and Rey just looked at him, her eyes bright with hot tears once more.

“Every time they come between us, whispering in your ear, interfering. You are done with them. It’s not a request” he said, trying to summon come conviction.

He felt like an imposter in a man’s skin, hurting and breaking and pushing, when really, he was an eight-year-old boy, desperately wishing for Rey to prove that he couldn’t push her away, that this time – someone would stay, even as he knew he couldn’t let her.

“If you loved me, you would do as I say” he said emptily, an invisible script of the worst things he could say to her, the very worst, manipulative ways to bend her to his will, already written in his mind. Because, the truth was, and it was terrible to realise, these words came easily to him. Perhaps it was because he had heard them his whole life, maybe because he had confused them with love when he was just a lonely little boy full of secrets, but, either way, they had festered inside like poison, entered his cells, his blood and become his own words.

“Then, I can’t stay. I’m only making you worse.”

His head bowed, finally hearing the words he had been waiting for. The play entering its final act.

“So that’s it, things get difficult and you run away?”

“I’m not running away, I just love you too much to watch you destroy yourself, destroy us, anymore”

“How convenient. So now you’re leaving me, so much for telling me I’m not alone anymore, so much for telling me that now there’s two of us…” he said brokenly. Rey closed her eyes, her face closed.

“Enough. Stop, that’s enough now” she whispered and he let his breath out in a long, rush. She finished dressing in silence, and he pushed himself up, forced himself to put on clothes, to go through the motions of being alive.

There was an escalating feeling of panic in his chest, making every glimpse of her dark eyes, the curtain of her hair, falling artlessly around her face as she looked down, the graceful twist of her wrist and the line of her neck, more and more laden, for they would be the last.

“Ok, that’s me then… my things?”

“Sent to Jacks” he said, another of his mother’s bustling organisational decisions. She nodded
gratefully, and picked up her bag, her hands twisting on the strap, the time to say goodbye had come, and neither of them had words for it.

“Rey- Can I ask you something?”

“Of course”

“Just - don’t remember me like this. Pretend we never crossed paths that day. Let me remain teenage Ben in your mind. The one that protected you. Just remember the boy who tried to do his best for you” he asked.

“I can’t” Rey said immediately.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because I’ve loved you both and I just can’t” she said, with a tremulous smile. He put those words in the empty casket of his heart to take with him underground.

“Ok, then, do this for me. If you ever think of me, in the future, then, believe that I did change. Believe I found the strength”

“I can do that… I would do that anyway” she said with a juddering sigh.

“Thank you” he said, oddly formal now they stood on the precipice of farewell. They stared at each other, each one unwilling to be the first to look away. After a long moment, Ben reached out and brushed a tear from Rey’s cheek, managing to fold his face into an approximation of a smile.

“You better go, it’s getting late” he said. She nodded reluctantly, and slipped on her shoes. She walked to the doorway of the bedroom, and he chose to stay there, in that intimate place, that smelled like her, a little longer. He watched her hesitate on the threshold, forgetting how to breath, his hands clenched so tightly, new blood welled from half-moon punctures.

“See you around?” she said uncertainly, knowing there were no words adequate for the moment, with a strained, bittersweet smile, one foot already in the hall.

“I doubt it, kid” he said, matching her smile, before turning away. He couldn’t watch her leave. The sound of the door shutting was like a death knell.

The moment Jack’s arms went around Rey, she thought she would break down all over again, as if sobbing on the subway, crammed in a corner seat, avoiding curious gazes, wasn’t bad enough. But when her uncle’s arms went around her, she relaxed into that familiar comfort and found she had no more tears.

“I couldn’t save him and I couldn’t stay with him. I’ve left him alone. He’s gone.” she babbled,
thinking how pathetic it sounded, and how tragically misguided an idea it might sound to Jack. But then she had always launched herself at other people’s problems, always believed that she could do something, that she could win.

“You tried, and that means something. That’ll mean something to him too, one day. Besides, Ben Solo has survived all kinds of hell in his life, he’ll survive this too, and maybe, just maybe come out the other side with what he desperately wants”

“Which is?”

“To be a man who deserves you”

His phone was vibrating angrily in his pocket, and Ben became slowly aware that he had been sitting, back against the kitchen counter, staring at the door for a long time. He pulled his phone out, and blinked at the time. It was almost midnight. Rey had come home from the hospital about 6pm, leaving shortly after. Leaving him. She had left.

He looked at the caller – Hux. He switched the phone off, and put it on the floor, resuming his vigil of the door. He knew he had to answer, knew it was important, but he couldn’t quite summon the courage just yet.

Maybe if he concentrated really hard, he could rewind the clock, and Rey would come through the door again, and he’d say different things, better things, turn it all around. He’d apologise and he’d tell her that he understood how he had messed up, a million different ways since she’d returned to his life. He’d tell her he knew he was too broken to fix, but if she’d just stay, he could hold all the little pieces of himself together, with all his strength, every moment, just to be near her. He would never mention the word arrangement to her, and he would try and be Ben Solo again, the boy Leia Organa Solo had raised to be a gentleman. There would be no commands, and no nerve shaking insecurity. There would be no control and no illusions of acceptance. There would be gentleness and love, kindness and understanding. He’d be a whole man, if only she’d stay.

His phone lit up, sending electronic light glowed over the polished floor beneath him. He looked down and saw the message sitting there, from Hux.

“Solo, our leader demands your presence, immediately”

He stared at it so long, his eyes stared to burn. His mind wrenched itself from its contemplation of
Rey and sank back into its previous numbness.

This time though, as he changed his clothes, putting on black jeans and a black hoodie, there was a focused edge to his numbness, like a resting predator, slowly waking. He pulled the hood slowly up, leaving only his pale face for the world to pick over, like carrion, his body continuing though he was certain his heart died when Rey had walked out the door.

Rey was right, he knew then, maybe had always known. Controlling her was a poor substitute for having some kind of control over his own life. But, because he had wanted her so desperately, it had sated his thirst. But it had been momentary. Rey had wanted him to find his strength, to finally stand up and say – no more, for the sake of the boy he’d been that had never been strong enough, and the girl who had waited for nothing.

As he slipped from this apartment, his black clothes and black soul merging with the night seamlessly, he wished that he could have a slither of Rey’s strength, that every time she had touched him, smiled at him, been kind to him, despite it all, that she had planted a kernel of her courage inside, and if he were just to believe in it, he would be able to find it, when he needed it. And tonight, he knew he would need it. He finally knew what he had to do, his conflicted feelings now resolved.

He had to kill Snoke.

First Order’s offices were dark, darker than usual, despite the hour. He found the door disabled as he entered, which was strange in itself, and when he found no one manning the security desk, every nerve in his body went into high alert. It was time. His breathing was surprisingly calm as he waited for the lift, though all semblance of that fled, when the lift door slid open to reveal Hux himself, evidently waiting for him just inside. There was no turning back.

He remembered the Hux bustling him out onto the street after his confrontation with Snoke, where he had shattered his dream of exposing him, and one day being free of him. He had propelled him right out the building and onto the loud, rushing street.

“Gather your wits, Solo, try not to capture people’s attention” Hux had sneered at Ben, who was still shaking from repressed rage. He’d caught Hux’s blue eyed gaze and practically bared his teeth at him, his powerlessness making him mute.

“I said save it. You’ll need it…”
“For what?” Ben had growled, thinking suddenly that pounding Hux into the pavement might make him feel a little better. Then Hux had stolen all his anger, all his thoughts.

“For when we rid ourselves of our leader, once and for all” Hux had said quietly.

Ben had just stared at him for a long, long time.

“He’s put you up to this, I assume. Very clever, it won’t work” Ben finally said, reaching for the only explanation he could manage. Hux then reached into his pocket and pulled out a familiar image. It was his apartment, wrecked just like it was now. He stared at it, and then at Hux.

“When you were at the hospital, they were replaced”

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because I went to rather a lot of trouble getting you to disable them in the first place, so it irritates me to see my handiwork undone” Hux snarled at him, as realisation sunk in for Ben.

“You sent the picture – the threat”

“It wasn’t a threat… it was a warning, ever since little Rey came back into your life, Snoke has been obsessed with watching you two together… most jealously, in fact” Hux said, a tinge of distaste marking his mouth.

“Why warn me? You and Rey don’t exactly see eye to eye”

“No, and we make no secret of it. But, I owed her a debt, and in this, I repaid it.” There was an oddly dignified expression on Hux’s face, that Ben had never quite seen before, or never quite noticed.

“And me? Why are you helping me?”

“What makes you think I am helping you, maybe I’m just helping myself” Hux hedged, but Ben could see it for the bluster it was, and waited for Hux to come around.

“I also owe you a debt… and old debt, and it is not so easily repaid” Hux said quietly, and Ben had the awful feeling he was about to fall down the rabbit hole once more, as the devastation and revelations of the past days kept coming, relentlessly.

“I’m not a particularly nice person, and I certainly wasn’t a nice teenager, as Rey can account.”

“I remember” Ben said.

“You see, something happened to me, when I was young, very young, in fact, I was just old enough to know the shame of it, to feel the wrongness of it, but not old enough to know to tell anyone.” Ben stiffened, bracing himself for what he feared Hux was about to say. Eight-year-old Ben Solo, hidden inside, covered his ears and closed his eyes.

“You weren’t the only boy that Professor Snoke tutored” Hux said, his proud face more vulnerable than Ben had ever seen. Hux’s confession shook the earth beneath Ben, and it was all he could do to stay standing there and listening, as slowly, Hux continued, with great effort.

“I believe I actually met him first, a dubious honour. He was recommended by a friend of my father’s, and it turns out the company that he kept, well, there was an investigation into that group of men, and I know you were acquainted with the Montgomery’s, so, to put it mildly, they were
hardly—“Hux broke off, his gaze wavering a little, but then he found his focus again.

“I was going to tell someone, I was close, and then, I didn’t have to…” Hux said slowly. Ben couldn’t speak, could only watch Hux’s guilt blossom over his features.

“He met you, and he found his favourite” Hux said, taking a breath, and then pushing on.

“And I knew, and I could have stopped it, I could have told someone… but I didn’t. I didn’t because I was relieved that it was you, and not me. And I didn’t want to tell because I didn’t want to people to look at me and know. So, I didn’t.”

“And I thought that he’d move on as we got older, but he never did. And I watched you become a loner, I watched you fade away and I still didn’t tell, because every day that passed made it harder and harder to justify the waiting.”

Hux blew out a hard breath, and ran a hand through his hair, leaving his usually impeccable locks mussed, and Ben stared at the careless, red strands with a mindless fascination. Hux unsettled was an unprecedented sight.

“And so, I owe you a debt, Solo, and I will repay it the only way I know how. A life for a life” Hux said carefully, a quick glance about revealing nothing but the odd passer-by, and a street full of busy traffic.

“Why now?” Ben finally managed to say, despite everything, still wary of a trap.

“Because Leia Organa-Solo wrote a last will and testament today, leaving total control of her foundation to her only son, Benjamin Solo – and I won’t let Snoke near those children. I won’t. If I have to prevent it myself, I will, but it is your task”

“Why me?”

“Because – you were his favourite” he repeated, his tone revealing the true horror, the terrible implication, of that simple statement.

Ben closed his eyes, and allowed himself to see a different childhood. One where he flew beside his father in the Falcon and laughed, waving to Leia on the ground, smiling up at them. One where he never pushed his parents away, and they in turn, had been kinder to each other. He saw a laughing, popular Ben Solo meet Rey at school and instantly being curious about the little scavenger from a world he knew nothing about. One where he never met a man called Snoke, and he never learned to be intimate with fear and anger.

“I take it you have a plan?” he asked finally, meeting Hux’s blue gaze.

“But of course”
dynamic.

“Are you?”

They scowled at each other as the elevator came to a smooth stop.

“It’s immaterial at this point… Ready or not-” Hux snapped, flexing his black gloved hands.

The doors slid open, onto the red hallway, shrouded in shadow. Ben nodded slowly, following Hux out the elevator.

“It’s time” Ben breathed.

Chapter End Notes

One chapter to go...
“A pleasant surprise” Snoke wheezed, as Ben entered the room, and he saw he had situated himself on the bed he kept there in there. It was even darker than usual, and Ben could see only a couple of screens illuminated, one of which was prominently displaying his apartment. He looked over to see Snoke watching him with a slight smile.

“Redecorating?” his teacher asked, leaving Ben in no doubt that his last days had been observed. He swallowed, and nodded jerkily.

“You have had the most interesting few days, haven’t you? Ghostly apparitions, visits from brawny young men and of course, fights with the scavenger. You must be simply worn out. What happened to the boy you put in the hospital?” He asked, without much interest.

“He is recovering”

“Luckily for you” Snoke smirked.

“You mother doesn’t look well, I trust the plans for the foundation are cemented.”

“They are” Ben thought stonily, Snoke would never get his hands on it.

“And Rey – what of her?”

“We have ended our relationship.” Ben said shortly. Snoke was practically beaming.

“Well, it seems my faith in you is restored.”

“You see, my dear, dear boy, I knew you would prove your worth, if I gave you enough space. The old adage is true indeed, if you love something, let it go, if it is yours, it will return, and you have returned.” Snoke’s tone was nauseating. Ben forced himself to stay calm and play the part, to wear the mask Snoke himself had helped him construct.

Ben walked a slow circle around the room, and could feel Snoke’s curiosity bristling off him, even as eager as he was to have him visit, willingly.

“It’s true. Without your guidance, I wouldn’t have seen what Rey was doing to me, the effect she was having on my life… thank you” Ben said, careful not to lie, as his teacher could always hear falsehoods in his voice. Snoke watched him carefully a beat longer, and then broke into a small smile.

“I am not a man who needs constant validation, but your thanks warms my heart” Ben swallowed down his distaste at the words, and made his tone light, as he wandered to the stand of medicines
Snoke took at regular intervals, to keep functioning day in and day out.

“How did you know about the investigation?” he asked.

“You pet detective’s boss is a man I know well, we go back far. He was simply horrified to hear about any potential scandal involving business interests he has profited so richly from” Snoke said. Ben tried to hide his horror at the words. How high up the corruption went, he couldn’t begin to imagine. He could see so very clearly now, how vulnerable a position he had put himself in, a pawn between powerful men, to be used when needed. A front, a fall guy.

“Holdo didn’t know, if that’s what you’re wondering” Snoke said in Ben silence. He moved past the medicine, aware of Snoke shrewd eyes on him, and wondered to the monitors. He watched the front entrance one flicker, a long moment of static.

“Technical difficulties, my engineers tell me. Young people today can hardly succeed at even the simplest of things” Snoke sneered.

“Not that I don’t enjoy your company, dear boy, you know that I do, but may I ask if this nocturnal visit had a purpose?” Snoke asked at length, as Ben settled finally into a chair near to him. He looked at him a long time, before forcing the slither of a smile to his lips.

“When I ended things with Rey, there was nowhere else I could think to go, nothing else I could do that would bring me more comfort, than to be here with you” he said the half truth, and held Snoke’s reptilian gaze. A flush of pleasure rose-up his wrinkled neck, and something close to a real smile floated past his wasted lips.

In a terrifying moment, he wondered if monsters ever really existed, if men like Snoke were born without influence, without damage. An uncomfortable question floated through his mind. What if Snoke himself had once called someone teacher, and loved and feared them with desperate loneliness.

An alarm sounded nearby, three sharp bursts of sound and Snoke turned toward the machine.

“Do you need something?” Ben asked, helpfully, shifting forward. Snoke glanced over, his sentimentality still written across his face.

“The mind prevails, even as the body crumbles, such is the legacy of great men, time is something not easily bought - Can you fetch me my medicine, the one with the blue cap, son” Snoke said, and watched carefully as Ben went to the littered table top, clearly selecting the correct bottle and bringing it over to him. He held it in his hands a long moment, as the alarm beeped again, just out of reach, as Snoke eyed him thoughtfully.

“Here” Ben said, holding it out, and passing it to Snoke. The man grabbed at it, pulling it into his hands possessively, and Ben had never seen that edge of relief on his mentor’s face before. His frail hands struggled to turn the cap, but he managed without help.

“You know, it occurred to me, when I was speaking to Detective Holdo, that I have never really asked after your conditions… In fact, you’ve never volunteered information about them either” Ben said lightly, as he watched Snoke select his required dosage of pills and swallow them down with water. Snoke put the glass down and the pill bottle too, his important task accomplished, he sat back and looked at Ben with an air of superiority.

“It is not the student’s role to question the teacher, this you know”

“True, but, she said something that made me curious”
“What did she say?”

“She said… I’m surprised that man is still alive. It was odd” Ben said slowly.

“And then, I started to think about anything amiss I might not have noticed before, such as how careful you are about where to eat, and what to drink. How you stick always to the same things, and rarely you touch people, surfaces, certainly not random food and drinks” Ben said, and Snoke watched him darkly.

“Your point being, Kylo Ren?” he asked, and Ben held his gaze a long moment, communicating his dark intent for a flash, before shrugging lightly.

“No point, just an observation” he said and smiled. It was the smile of a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Suddenly, Snoke’s hands tightened on the metal rail of his bed, and he coughed, a dry wheeze, and Ben’s smile turned vicious. The wolf dropping it’s woollen cloak.

“It does pay to be observant after all… and I can understand why you’ve always been discreet… what an incredible weakness to carry, to have to mask… even from those you love” Ben said, sitting forward, his body the picture of concern, as he picked up the pill bottle and stared at it.

The heart monitor in the back ground started to speed up, it’s constant beeps an unsettling background, as Ben screwed his eyes up, making out the small print.

Snoke’s face was swelling, already hideous to start with, a large bulge began around his mouth, allowing drool to escape, as his hands flew to his throat, which was quickly expanding.

“That’s terrible… there is no indication that this medicine might have been exposed to certain allergens… such as peanuts. How odd, highly unusual, but certainly not unheard off- we must get onto the manufacturer, it’s a public safety risk” Ben said, turning the bottle over his hands, and frowning again at the writing.

“How embarrassing… it’s one of ours.” He murmured, his eyes shooting to Snoke’s purpling face.

“You did this – it’s no accident” Snoke rasped, his expression accusing.

“But, how could I? Practically no one knew of this allergy… you have always kept it so secret, I really don’t know how anyone could establish, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I knew about it.” He said lowly, his face the picture of concern.

Ben stood and circled behind him, going back to the desk and rifling through the cabinets. He returned with an epi pen, and Snoke grabbed it off him, stabbing it into his arm. He waited a long moment, and then looked wildly down at it.

“Looks like the mechanism isn’t working, more shoddy work. I don’t suppose it’s one of ours as well, is it? That production company is really going to have difficulty explaining such incompetence” Ben said, hovering over Snoke.

“The cameras – everyone will know. You might be rid of me, but you’ll spend your life in jail for it” Snoke gasped out.

“Maybe, or maybe those glitches have affected your cameras too, and the sound as well. Who knows? Young people can never quite get things right, can they?” Ben murmured, as he sat on the edge of the bed, which forced Snoke down, even as his body started to seize. Snoke fixed his eyes on Ben, wild and desperate they turned intent as he realised that Ben was going to sit and watch
“It is fitting, it is your legacy to murder your father figures”

“That’s where you’re wrong… I didn’t kill my father” Ben said, and knew it to be the truth.

“I loved him” he said. Snoke clawed his hand desperately, as Ben pulled out his phone, and made a show of dialling 911.

“But you’ve loved me too, Ben Solo… you have loved me” Snoke muttered wetly, his chest and whole body starting to shake, his eyes almost pleading on Ben’s. Ben leaned forward, bringing his face close to the monster who had haunted his nightmares, sleeping and awake, for most of his life.

What he saw there stilled him, the implications of it marking his soul. In Snoke’s broken eyes he saw only a pathetic, dying man, who had lived a terrible life. There were no monsters, there was only men and the choices they made.

“No, you’re mistaken. I have never loved you, I have only ever hated you, you have only ever disgusted me. The most compassionate feeling I have ever had for you, maybe, was fleeting pity.” Ben breathed quietly, his eyes locked onto Snoke’s as he saw the old man’s heart break, even as it was convulsing.

“I’m glad to be here, at the end. At your end. I just wish it had been sooner” Ben muttered, as Snoke’s whole body went into cardiac arrest, the heart monitor bleeping erratically.

“And when you are gone… I won’t remember you. No one will” Ben said at last, as the beeping flattened, and Snoke’s last gaze slipped away, lost it’s focus.

Ben stared at the body, feeling unwatched for this first time in as long as he could remember. It was such an anticlimactic, ordinary way for Snoke to die. The man who had loomed larger than life in Ben’s mind, from when he’d been a cowering child, to the adult man who had felt too embroiled in his schemes and too sullied by their shared past to escape him.

When the paramedics arrived, Ben didn’t have to fake the stunned look on his face, his confusion and shock. They pronounced Snoke dead at the scene, and took his body, the police arriving before they left. Hux appeared, summoned by Ben, as a senior legal advisor of First Order Finance.

The duty cops took Ben’s statement, and Hux took them to the control room to look at the footage. In the end, they decided to take him down to the station. Hux followed behind, making little effort to hide how little he appreciated being called out of bed for such matters, for a boss he didn’t particularly like.

Ben sat in the interrogation room, and mind strayed to Rey for a moment, he wondered if she was in bed at Jacks, safe and warm. The door to the room opened, and he looked up, finding himself the recipient of an eagle eyed stare.

“Kylo Ren, this is quite the surprise” Detective Holdo said sharply, as she entered the room and sat before him.

“Shouldn’t you have a partner present for an interrogation?” Ben asked mildly.

“This isn’t an interrogation, it’s an informal chat… as far as anyone can tell so far, Snoke died of anaphylaxis.”

“I know, I was there, I saw it.
She stared at him a long time, before shifting back.

“Tell me what happened” So he went through his statement again, how he’d visited Snoke at night, and they’d talked, he’d taken his medication and then gone into some kind of shock. Ben had found his epi pen for him, but something had gone wrong, and then, before the ambulance had arrived, he was gone.

“Why were you there at that time at night?”

“We often keep irregular hours at First Order, international markets and all”

“And tonight?”

“I just broke up with my girlfriend, I wanted to talk it over with someone”

“With Snoke?” Holdo’s face made no secret of her distaste.

“He was my mentor” Ben said flatly.

“So… a friend?” Holdo pushed. Ben simply shrugged.

“How long had you known Snoke had a serious allergy?”

“I didn’t until tonight.”

“Awfully convienent” Ben shrugged and remained silent.

“Do you know why Snoke had medicine from a different company than his usual medicine? From Sith enterprises?”

“No idea, perhaps testing his own work”

“So, you admit to knowing that Snoke owned Sith Enterprise through a shell corporation?”

“I admit to knowing that First Order commissioned that company to produce their product.” Hux’s words on his lips, spilt out easily. The man was nothing if not good at covering himself.

“So, tell me, what am I to think?”

“It seems to me that Snoke was just a very ill old man, with a dangerous allergy he had kept secret, and victim of an unfortunate accident. He’ll be missed.”

“But not by you”

“Your words, not mine” Ben said, his perfectly composed mask untouched.

“Is that all detective, because it’s very late, and I’ve had an upsetting evening. I would like to go home and grieve in peace” he said. Holdo sighed long and hard.

“There’ll be an investigation into how the lab could have contaminated a batch, as well as looking into the video footage of tonight. We will also look briefly into Snoke’s background, and see if anything unsavoury shakes out, if anyone might have had a motive to purposefully harm him. There will be an autopsy, though I am predicting in the end, it will be ruled an accident. Don’t leave town, in case we need to contact you again”
“Whatever you need, I’m here” Ben said, hiding his relief.

He got up to leave, and as Holdo opened the door, she turned and shook his hand, looking up at him with shrewd eyes.

“Take care, Kylo Ren—“

“Actually, it’s Ben. Ben Solo” he said, extending a hand to her. She took it slowly.

“Well, take care of yourself, Ben Solo, I don’t want to see you in here again, I hope not to”

“I don’t plan to be here again, Detective” he said, with the ghost of a smile, as he turned away, and made his way through the precinct, past the security doors and saw Hux waiting on a hard wooden bench.

He stood up as Ben passed, and together they left the station, walking out into the crisp early morning air. Winter was passing slowly, there was the smallest hint of Spring in the air. It was fresh and invigorating. It felt like the dark and cold had finally passed, and a new beginning was approaching. They went together to Hux’s car, and got in.

“I trust all went according to plan?”

“It did. She said they’ll review the footage”

“Which shows next to nothing. The cameras had been glitching for weeks, and certainly no audio”

“She also said they’d look into Snoke, and Sith Enterprises”

“Which will be a short investigation, considering who his silent partners were. No, I believe we have heard the end of it all – a tragic accident” Hux said with satisfaction.

“It was a good plan… simple, effective”

“The best plans are the simplest. Leaders fall, dictators are overthrown and men die, all for simple reasons. Love, ambition, greed and lust.”

“What was our reason”

“The most simple one of all… revenge” Hux said quietly, as they wound through the streets of the Upper West side toward Ben’s home. He parked outside and they both stared out the window at the lightening street, just waking up.

“It’s so quiet” Ben said, not quite knowing what he meant, but Hux nodded instantly.

“It’ll take some getting used to – this… freedom” Hux said, before turning to Ben.

“I trust I can count on you for a decent reference?”

“Going to be job hunting?” Ben asked. Hux studied his fingers on the steering wheel, tapping them in a random pattern.

“I fancy a change, maybe non-profit, for a change of pace” he said. Ben stared at the side of his face, cool and pale in the dawn, the fiery reds and golden of the sunrise reflecting in his hair. Maybe it was time they both had a second chance, to be better men. He reached into his wallet, and slipped a business card out, passing it to Hux.
“Feeling sentimental Solo? Want to stay in touch?” Hux scoffed, a little incredulously, before looking down, and stilling at the name he saw written there in elegant gold font.

Leia Organa-Solo
President
Organa-Solo foundation

“They are always looking for good people. Give her a call” he suggested before getting out and shutting the door.

His apartment building loomed before him, huge and empty. Without Rey inside, he felt almost no inclination to enter the place again.

But there were things to do, wrongs to right, and he’d need sleep to do it.

Inside the emptiness of the apartment echoed the emptiness inside him. He stripped his clothes off and dumped them in the washing machine, desperate to be rid of the lingering sulphurus smell he had come to associate with Snoke. He had seen a man die, watched the light go out his eyes. He thought he would feel more, something, anything.

He went to the shower, and made the water as hot as he could stand it, and stood under it for a long time. After a while, his hands started shaking, and the urge to vomit rose up within him. He swayed dizzily under the onslaught of burning water, and forced the only image he knew could calm him, to his mind.

Rey lying against his chest, her head over his heart, her slight weight against him, a gift. She drew her slender, artist’s fingers through his hair, threading in and out the dark strands, as she smiled up at him, her honey coloured eyes warm and loving.

“Just breath Ben, everything is going to be ok” she said softly in his mind, and bit by bit, his body calmed.

He thought of what Rey would say, if he could tell her everything. If he could tell her he had added murder to his list of sins, but somehow he didn’t think she’d judge him for it. In fact, he thought, maybe, she might just be proud of him, as terrible as it was.

She would tell him to get out the shower and eat something, and then lie down and sleep. Maybe being the kind of man who deserved Rey, meant taking better care of himself, he thought, as he followed her imagined instructions. After all, if it was what Rey wanted, when could he ever deny her anything. He took comfort in knowing, that while he was trying, seeing if he could be that better man, that she would be achieving her dreams. And if she found people to keep her company on the way, he wouldn’t blame her for it. Rey’s path was out in the world now, while his was here, where his demons lay.
“OOhhh, airmail, fancy” Finn said, dropping the letter onto Rey’s chest, as he returned from the kitchen bearing a package of cookies. She grabbed two to hold in each hand and frowned at the letter.

“I don’t want to know, whatever it is. Today is for eating our body weight in junk, and then later, drowning out sorrows in everything and anything we can afford” Rey muttered, stuffing the crumbly cookies into her mouth.

Finn lifted her feet up and sat down, replacing them on his lap afterward.

“I know, and I am looking forward to that, believe me, but… let’s open this first”

“Whatsoever, you do it” Rey grunted, finding the remote and unpausing Dirty Dancing. She had watched Baby carrying a watermelon, and was seeing her react to the dancing in the club house when Finn whistled.

“Rey, you gotta read this”

“Not now”

“Yes, now” he declared, wrestling the remote off her and switching the whole tv off.


Dear Rey,

That might sound awfully informal, but once you’ve met me, I’m sure you’ll understand. I have never been one to stand on ceremony, and my sister has told me so much about you, I feel like we are on a first name basis. In that spirit, I’ll introduce myself as Luke.

As you know, I am Ben’s uncle, Leia’s brother and I run an institute in Italy, for aspiring artists.

And you Rey, are an artist. Leia was kind enough to send me some of your things, and I admit I was very impressed. I haven’t taken on a new student, since my nephew, and suffice to say, it didn’t exactly work out.

Ben is a complicated man, and I do not wish to pry into your relationship, however, I do want to extend an offer.

I would like you to come and study with me, art and art therapy, a true calling of mine,
independent from Leia and the foundation.

The foundation does great things, and if you choose to work there in the future, I would be very happy. However, I would not seek to tie a young woman such as yourself into such a future debt, before she has had an opportunity to decide if she likes it.

I am getting old, I can admit that to you Rey, freely here, as much as it rankles. I need help around the institute, young blood. Unfortunately, the meagre wages aren’t enough to attract locals. I can offer you room and board at the institute, in addition to the small stipend, if you will help keep the institute in running shape, cook sometimes, clean on occasion and generally be helpful. I will also endeavour to teach you my self-developed Art Therapy programme, and I suppose, you may find some value in the teachings of an old has been, for your own art too.

I would keep your sojourn here as private as possible, if you wished. The institute lies in a small town, more a village really, in Tuscany, Italy. It’s called Montemerano, part of the participality of Grosseto.

It’s a quiet place, for study and peaceful contemplation. For healing.

I hope I have not overstepped, writing to you like this. If indeed I have not, please contact me at the email or phone number below.

Kindest

Luke S.

Rey simply stared at the letter, hand written at that. Her head was muddled and her pulse racing.

“Well, what are you going to do?” Finn asked, bug eyed. Rey stared at him, speechless.

“I have no idea...” she trailed off, her mind already going to Jack and his treatments, to Jess and the unfinished job at First Order. To Ben, most of all. Ben who she wasn’t supposed to be seeing, though her awareness of his proximity was like a brand on her heart that she couldn’t ignore, or a little red string tying them together, tugging her in his direction constantly, and she had to fight against it, not to be pulled back into his orbit.

“Well, what does your heart tell you?” Finn asked, and in the wake of that question, instincts first, Rey smiled.
“Ecco Signorina, siamo arrivati” the taxi driver turned to her, the old Fiat Punto at a stop, so Rey guessed it meant they’d arrived. She looked around, the dry dust of the road coating the window, and swirling a little outside. The man had gotten out, and moved to the boot, and was suddenly opening her door, forcing her out onto the sunbaked dirt lane. She looked around, quickly adjusting her sunglasses against the glare of the Tuscan sun and held out the paper with the address of the institute on it to the man.

“Instituto dell’Ach-to?” she asked, stumbling over the pronunciation.

“Si, si, se la” the taxi driver said, gesturing further along the lane. They had passed through a tiny village, with an ancient looking castle atop the hill, which she assumed was Montemerano. Where the taxi was attempting to leave her, was about 5 minutes down the hill on the other side. All she saw around were rolling hills and fields of sunflowers, lifting their heavy faces to midday worship. There was copses of trees, just like in the movies, tall and thin, they marched up drive ways to enormous homes and along the winding roads like sentinels.

As she had remained, staring down at the paper, she suddenly realised the taxi man had gotten back into the aging Punto, and was pulling away, bidding her goodbye out the window, as she stood watching him disappear in a cloud of dust. As the sound of the sole car faded, the sounds of the countryside crept back in, as Rey turned in the direction he had shown her, shouldering her backpack determinedly and set off.

The road was bumpy, really just compacted rocks, pale sandstone yellow and burnt amber. She walked along the lane, after a while a low wall appeared, made of the same stone. She soldiered on, the midday sun making sweat slide down her neck, prickling the sensitive skin there. At length, after at least 10 good minutes of dragging a heavy case, burden by the backpack, along the sunbaked road, she saw a glimmer of a building in the distance.

Pushing on, she saw, as she closed the distance, that it was indeed something. She walked on, past an olive grove and what seemed to be hazelnut and fig trees, until she saw the blue of a swimming pool. She leaned over the wall, and saw it, empty, with a green scum at the bottom, and a rickety old deck chair beside. Heartened that she was in the right place, she found a last burst of energy to cover the last few yards, where she could see an intricate gate, set in the wall which had been steadily rising to well over her head. The gate was propped open, and so, she slipped through, and dropped her bags. She was met with the sight of a beautiful, if crumbling, old villa, sitting behind a courtyard, which was covered in trellising, where grapes were growing in abundance. There was a wide wooden table with many chairs, and a fire pit to the side, and just hiding under a small lean to, she spied the nose of an old Cinquecento.

A loud whistle caught her attention, as she shifted her eyes to the roof of the building, and the man who had appeared there. He was wearing an old, Hawaiian shirt, unbuttoned and a bandana around his head, holding back long, grey hair. His face was sporting an impressive grey beard, and his smile was fierce.

“Are you Rey?” he called.

“Master Skywalker, it’s such an honour to be chosen and I can’t wait to learn from you, you’re such an inspiration to me” she gushed out, unable to prevent herself, in the presence of the legend.
“Likewise, I am so glad you’re here” he said, as Rey beamed up at him, taken aback but flattered. “Really??”

“Really, there’s a pigeon stuck in the water tank, and I can’t quite reach it, be a dear, will you?” And just like that Rey had begun her training.

Chapter End Notes

And that's it for Part 3.

Thank you so much for joining me on Ben and Rey's journey up to here)))

Stay tuned for Part 4 - Balance!

Thoughts? Predictions? Best bits... worst?
The years apart part 1

Chapter Summary

As before, when our lobsters are apart, snippets of their time separately, with the music, as poems, that inspired the scene.

Rey

Somethin’ filled up
my heart with nothin’.
Someone told me not to cry.

Arcade Fire – Wake Up

The first thing Rey understood about Luke Skywalker, is that he had greatly exaggerated his approval of her art.

Every day, after doing her villa duties, Rey would sit in Luke’s teaching studio and start work on a blank canvas. She painted what she always had. The outdoors, the woods, the light, the freedom Jack had given her, the sense of home.

She was always proud of the work, knew it was good, technically proficient, and pretty to look at, and yet, as Luke, the great master, would go about his work and he would give it barely a glance, before nodding and disappearing, she couldn’t help but lose confidence.

She tried to ask him what was missing, or what he didn’t like about her work, but he was evasive at best.

On afternoon, after two weeks of the same treatment, when frustration got the better of her, frustration and missing Ben, which was a constant, dull ache in her chest, she knocked her canvas off the easle, and the paint she had been mixing and messed up, went flying over the stone floor. She sat down against the wall, her head resting on the wall, and looked out over the balcony railing, staring at the fields in the bright, relentless sun.

“Feel better?” Luke had asked, now leaning in the open doorway. He had been absent for days, typical he would choose now to check on her. She shook her head. She missed New York and Jack. She missed her friends, and most of all, she missed him.

“You know, I once had a student who liked to destroy things, but it never did make him feel better either” Luke said lightly, and Rey turned her head to watch him. He had never spoken to her about Ben, not yet anyway. Maybe he was working up to it, but so far, he hadn’t quite reached that point.

“Do you miss him?” Luke asked, his eyes fastening on Rey’s for a moment.
“Every single second, every minute, every day” she answered simply, and took a deep, calming breath, forcing her hands from the tight fists they had formed, and smoothing them over her knees.

“You?” she asked suddenly, and Luke was caught off guard.

“I don’t know him, not anymore. But the boy I did know… yeah, I miss that kid. All the time” he said with a small smile.

“Have you ever meditated Rey?” Luke asked the next morning, while they ate bread and ricotta, topped with fresh apricot jam, on the terrace overlooking the empty swimming pool.

“Not really, I mean, not much.”

“I find it a useful tool to get the creative juices flowing, to enter the right headspace… for –” Luke trailed off, pouring himself more coffee, and shifting to look over the hazily hills rolling past the walls of the villa.

“For what?” Rey prompted.

“Being honest” Luke said, taking a sip. Rey thought about his words.

“Do you think my art isn’t honest?” she asked at length.

“I didn’t say anything like that”

“Yeah, but you don’t like it” Rey pressed, keen to ferret out the reason for the lacklustre response to her work. Luke sighed.

“Art is experience and emotion, it is happiness and love and light, and all those good things… but it is also pain, and fear and suffering.” Luke said in a measured tone.

“Your paintings are beautiful, but they lack depth. I can see you’re a positive person, a light and happy person, but everyone has been touched by darkness. There is no contrast in your work. No shadows.” Rey stared at Luke, her mind blank for a moment, the gentle criticism hurtful but asked for.

“Have you shadows, Rey?” he asked her, raising a blue glass bottle of sparkly water to his mouth and sipping it, his blue eyes lost on the horizon.

“Yes” she whispered. So very many.

“I wish you’d show them to me…” Luke said, before turning away and leaving her with those thoughts.
Ben met the eye of each person on the board, a lot of them vaguely familiar from another life, one in which he had suffered boring cocktail parties and fundraisers at his mother’s side, unable to see how any of this had affected him. How selfish.

“I propose my son, Ben, to take over the day to day running, effectively to ascend to my position, as due to declining health, I am unable to continue” Leia said, and only Ben knew how his mother wasn’t beyond tugging on people’s sympathy to get her way. He stifled his smile, and instead, tried to look as trustworthy as possible.

“With the approval of the board I would like this change to be immediate”

“And just how are we supposed to believe that this man, your estranged son, is to be trusted with such great responsibility?” a strong, familiar voice called, and someone leaned forward to fix Ben with an intent look. Ben froze, his smile slipping a little on his face as he was confronted with a ghost.

“Ben” the man said, as he rose and approached Leia and him where they stood around the table. He was a bear of a man, even towering over Ben, just as hirsute as he’d always been, though, now his mane of wavy hair and thick, bushy, but maintained beard was white. Ben bite down the title that immediately sprang to mind for the man standing before him, watching him with intelligent brown eyes. Uncle Chewie.

“Charles” Leia greeted, a real smile crinkling the corners of her eyes. Han’s best friend almost their entire lives, Charles Wooksley, Chewie amongst family, had been an uncle to Ben growing up.

“Good to see you Leia, good to see both of you, together, no less” Chewie said, giving Leia an affectionate hug, and turning his expectant gaze on Ben.

“How are you, kid?” his uncle asked, and Ben forgot what kind of impression he might be making to the board, it suddenly seemed vitally important to speak to this man who he could practically envisage his father standing beside, so often had they been together.

“I’m good, I’m… better than I have been in a long time” he said honestly, feeling like a little child, standing in front of his favourite uncle asking for his approval, and his father’s through him. Chewie smiled suddenly, an expression straight from his dearest memories.

“I’m glad to hear it. We missed you, at Han’s funeral.” Chewie said, stepping closer to Ben, and hugging him. Ben felt a pang of pain go through him at the words, but Chewie squeezed him a
little harder and whispered in his ear.

“Don’t worry, I covered for you with the old man” he said gruffly, and Ben felt an involuntary laugh slip out, and as he leaned away from the hug, saw him mother giving him an incredulous look. It was still an effort, to laugh, to smile. At her expression, he vowed to try and do it more.

“Well, it seems like a solid plan to me, why don’t we get this vote out the way,” Chewie said in a commanding tone, and the board looked happy to oblige. As the longest standing member, setting it up initially with Han and Leia, Chewie’s word was law.

The vote was quick, and before Ben could really process it, he was President of the Organa-Solo Foundation.

“Now, kid, let’s go get a drink. We’ve got some catching up to do. Leia, you choose the place” Chewie said authoritatively, as he slipped his hand under his mother’s elbow and steered her toward the shiny, glass doors of the conference room. Ben followed, and for a moment, in the blurred reflection, it almost looked like Leia, Han and Chewie, inseparable as always and dreaming of their plans of making the world a little better.

He made another vow, this time to Han. He would finish what they’d started.
Rey

Ex's and the oh, oh, oh's they haunt me
Like ghosts they want me to make 'em all
They won't let go

Ellie King - Ex's and oh's

The first time Rey kissed someone other than him she had just had one of the worst days of her time in Italy. After waiting in the post office for an eternity, no air conditioning, of course, only to find out she didn’t have the right ticket, and had to start again. Desperate attempts at communication, which weren’t going anywhere. Her bags broke on the way back to the car after the market, with the oranges rolling quickly down the steep street, as she watched them go. The old car, chugging and decrepit at best, finally giving up on her on the way back to the institute, was the last straw. When the car spluttered to a stop on the quiet road just outside the village, she had lowered her head to the wheel and screamed out her frustration. Nothing was going as it was supposed to.

Jack was going in for a check-up, a final one for a while. It would tell them if he needed more treatment or if he was finished. It was huge, and she couldn’t stop thinking about it. She felt like she should be there, and the guilt of it was driving her crazy. As she sat in the sweltering car, watching a wisp of smoke leak out the bonnet, she pulled her phone out to see a message from Jack, her adrenaline spiking as she opened it.

On my way in now, and don’t worry, had an unexpected escort – I’m not flying Solo

Rey had stared at the terrible pun, her heart spluttering. It was such a Jack joke, and yet, there was no other interpretation for his meaning. She typed out a reply Is Ben with you? And then deleted it. She didn’t want to know, she decided, even if it made her heart tremble with hope and love, at the thought of Ben showing up to take Jack to his appointment. Between not thinking about Jack, and not thinking about Ben, which was a constant battle, her mind felt torn in all directions.

She should be at home, and going with Jack. She should be checking on Ben, making sure he was alright, even if they weren’t together. She could be sitting in a faceless waiting room right now, inches away from the love of her life. Instead, she was a world away, alone, again. She wasn’t even painting anymore, couldn’t even seem to create here, cowed by Luke’s criticism. The villa needed constant upkeep, and she barely had time for the training in Art therapy Luke sometimes remembered to give her.
She was in the midst of this onslaught of negativity when a moped stopped in front of her, and a man got off.

His name was Paolo, and he was all flashing white teeth, strong stubbled jaw and twinkling eyes. He smiled at her with a warmth that comforted Rey a little, as he pulled up the hood of the car and looked inside. His English was far better than her Italian, and, he quickly assessed what was wrong with the car, wiping his hands on a rag, he left the hood up, and turned to her, an apologetic look on his expressive, handsome face.

“I’m sorry, but it’s too hot, you know?”

“Over-heated”

“Esattamente” he said smoothly, coming to stand before Rey, and tucking a strand of hair flapping over her sweaty forehead behind her ear and giving her a killer smile.

“It’s ok, I will drop you at the Villa, and call for the repair, Luke will know what to do” he said, steering her over to his bike. She looked at it doubtfully.

“Vai, sit, everything is ok” he said again, sitting at the front, and moving forward so she had space. She threw her leg over, and sat gingerly down, as he pulled her hands around his slim waist, so she was holding onto him, her shopping bags dangling from her elbows.

“For safety, yes?” he said, his voice a low murmur, tapping her hands, clasped over his stomach. Rey nodded, and they took off slowly. Paolo didn’t drive too fast, or try and scare or impress her. Instead, they took the wide curves of the road gently, and turned along the path to the villa after a while. He manoeuvred the bike over the old road, swearing quietly as some of the bigger rocks jolted them abruptly. Rey couldn’t help but laugh at his colourful description of the road.

As they drove, Rey went from being grateful to Ben for being there for Jack, to resentful that he was inserting himself into her life, when she was trying to desperately to get over him. It was selfish really, she thought angrily, not even meaning it for a moment, so wildly confused it hurt her head and her heart.

Finally, they stopped in front of the gates, and she carefully climbed off, with his assistance. He carried the bags into the courtyard, and then, straight into the kitchen, setting them on the table.

The room was dimly lit, with the shutters closed to keep the hot sun from heating up the cool air of the house, the smell of beeswax from the table polish, and a hint of lavender and lemon verbena from the plants by the door permeated the room and Rey felt a building inside her chest. A desperate, grateful and lonely pull toward this man who had taken care of her, just for a heartbeat. And she missed him so terribly in that split second. Missed being taken care off. Missed being safe. Missed being loved.

Paolo turned from the table and went to speak again, but Rey closed the gap between them and pressed her lips to his.

He tasted of chewing gum and sunshine, and after a moment, his own lips moved back against hers, his tongue gently caressing her lips, his hands landing on her hips, and pulling her closer.

It was nice, Rey thought, as the kiss went on. It was comforting, and soothing and nice. But that was all. She didn’t feel it affect the emptiness inside her chest, her ravaged heart, limped on, uninspired.

He pulled away, after a moment, and Rey realised she had stopped kissing him, but was simply
standing there with her eyes closed desperately trying not to think of her last kiss, in a dark apartment in New York, with the man who owned a piece of her heart, and still hadn’t given it back.

“You have a good way of thanking someone, in America” Paolo said, and Rey laughed, the tension broken by the charismatic man before her. He smiled back, and pinched her cheek.

“Thank you, bella, what a gift” he said, and squeezed her shoulder.

“Thank you, for the lift, and everything” she said.

“Niente, it’s nothing. I am here, for you –anytime” he said, with a grin, before leaving, as Luke came to the door, looking out at the courtyard.

“What happened to the car?” he asked, as he casually dodged a dishtowel Rey aimed at his head.

Ben

Because I am a gentleman
Think of me as just your fan
Who remembers every dress you ever wore.

Magnetic Fields – I don’t really love you anymore

The house was completely different, and completely the same. Leia had had it redecorated for him, after she’d understood exactly why he found it so very difficult to be there. In fact, she had redecorated the whole house. Tried to destroy the memories that had suffocated him. The exact pattern of the floral wallpaper in the hall, when he would watch her leave for a long trip, Snoke’s hand heavy on his shoulder, reassuring his mother that all would be well in her absence, and all Ben could do was stare at that wallpaper, little rose buds, never quite blooming, frozen in time, forever denied that bloom into adulthood.

The tiles of the upstairs bathroom, and the memory of bath time. Threepio locking the door as she took off Ben’s clothes, and put him quickly under the water, as they both listened for the sound of a key turning in the lock. Threepio running over to hold the doorknob, her face desperate. Ben had focused on the pattern of water droplets on the tiles, and wished himself away.

And his room, most of all.
Later, after Threepio had been let go, some kind of visa problems, she had left quietly, without warning, and Ben had been alone with his teacher, as a new nanny was searched for.

He couldn’t stand the sight of his childhood room, and so, Leia had changed it completely, and turned it into another bathroom. Clean and faceless, without any memory attached to it.

Now, he made himself at home in his new room, previously a guest room. It was large, with an ensuite, and it was another room he had no memory off.

She had kept it simple, for Ben had simple tastes. It was light, white walls, and dark grey and black accents, except for a large painting over his bed. It was golden and green, a forest from his heart. It was Rey’s, purchased from Jessika, directly from their inventory of things they were going to put into the First Order offices. He sat and stared at it longer than he should.

“What do you think?” Leia asked, looking frail and so very much older, even more so than last month, inspecting the room. He smiled, and nodded.

“It’s great, thank you”

“No, Ben… thank you. It means a lot, to know you’re close” she said, shuffling in and sitting down on the end of the bed. He hesitantly laid a hand atop hers, the paper-thin skin, decorated with a wide purple bruise where her drip was inserted.

“It means a lot to be allowed to be here” he confessed, and saw Leia start at his words.

“You were always welcome here, Ben, always”

“Even after… even after what happened with Han?” he asked, a question he had always been afraid to see the answer to in his mother’s eyes. But, she had simply laid her other hand on his.

“Oh Ben, your father would be so proud of you, you must know that” she said, and Ben shook his head instinctively.

“You can’t know that –“ he started, and looked up into his mother’s fierce eyes as she gripped his fingers harder suddenly.

“Don’t try and tell me what I can and can’t know about that man. No one knew him like I did, not even Chewie. I know how he loved you, and how he felt like he’d failed you, and me. I feel guilty too sometimes, and then I realise… it’s the last thing Han would want. I can’t dishonour his memory, his wishes, so thoroughly as to blame myself for any of it. Let the blame lie in the right place, in the ground with that monster.” Leia said with certainty.

Ben let out a shaky breath, and glanced up at the painting above the bed, the lingering presence of Rey calming him.

“Sweetheart, there’s someone I would like you to meet. I think it would do you good to speak to her a little, about everything.”

“Who?” he asked.

“She’s an old friend, her name is Maz, well Dr Maz. I think she might help you let the past go—Please Ben, go and see her, just once, for me… it’s so hard, with my illness and my energy, I get so tired worrying—” Leia urged, and he couldn’t help but smile down at her. Her eyes, more tired than they’d ever been, still held that sparkle of a woman used to getting her own way, used to wrapping the men in her life around her finger, and he was still no exception.
“Ok, ok, you don’t have to wear me down. If it makes you happy. I’ll go” Ben said, and Leia raised his hand to her mouth, and pressed a kiss on the back, her smile making her young again for a moment.

“You make me happy” she said.

“Well, likewise” he said, returning her smile. She looked at him with such love, it choked him, filled him up inside, overflowing the empty crevices the years of isolation and darkness had left behind.

“We’ll be alright, Ben… everything is going to be alright” his mother whispered, and like a child, he found himself believing her.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the support for this story! I was blown away by the last chapter comments, even tho it was short somany people taking time to let me know what they were thinking... its why authors share their work, to interact and affect people... so thank you)))

If you liked, let me know?
xx
The years apart part 3

Chapter Notes

As always... I recommend listening to the songs the inspired the pieces... especially Il Mondo - which is just the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The book of love is long and boring
And written very long ago
It's full of flowers and heart-shaped boxes
And things we're all too young to know

The Book of Love

Peter Gabriel Original, Magnetic fields cover

6 months after that fateful conversation and Rey had still not tried to paint.

She hadn’t gone to the studio the day after she had spoken to Luke, and she didn’t go the next day either. Slowly time slipped past, as she fixed up the old villa, room by room. She hung new curtains and painted shabby walls. She fixed an old freezer in the stalla and rearranged the aging kitchen. She beat rugs and white washed the outside.

Every Tuesday she took the car into the little village and went to the market there, haggling in terrible Italian over tomatoes the size of her hand and spicy handmade sausages that Luke liked to chop up with olives and bread for lunch. She picked warm lemons from the institutes groves and started on the olive harvest. Every property on land which had olive trees, had to harvest the olives and make oil from them, it was a requirement.

Under the sun, day in and out for a week, she toiled in the sun under the dappled leaves, sweat thick on her back, a wide brimmed hat keeping the worst of the sun away, while Luke worked with a tiny handful of students inside.

She mowed the grass, polished glasses, swept floors and cooked, but she didn’t paint.

She couldn’t help googling Ben’s name sometimes, and what she had seen had turned her blood cold. Snoke was dead, an allergic reaction to a peanut or something else incredibly mundane. The dissolution of First Order Finance. At those times, she felt like she was living on another planet, he seemed so far, in another world, one she had walked away from and now had no right to know about. Her first thought was to call him, even as she knew she couldn’t.
She spoke to Jack from her laptop, when she took it into a larger town, and indulged in coffee and pastries for breakfast once a week, running errands for the Institute, going to the post office, paying bills, picking up gas for the generator.

Luke started to teach her about Art Therapy, introducing her gradually to his programme, and how he had developed it. He didn’t ask her about Ben again, and she didn’t ask him either. It was an unspoken rule, a silent agreement.

She started to follow Luke up to the roof in the morning and sat cross-legged, as the sun came slowly up, wrapped in a blanket against the faint chill of the dawn on a day when it promised to be hot later. Sometimes she just looked at the colours in the sky and wished she could paint them, then thought critically that they would be too pretty and light, and not enough shadow.

Sometimes she drank her coffee and just let her mind wander. Other times, and more and more frequently, she closed her eyes, and let the gold and crimson of the new day wash over her still features, as her mind floated somewhere far off, unfettered and free.

Healing.

But she still couldn't face the darkness that Luke was waiting for. It was too raw, it was Ben and everything that had passed between them. She wasn't ready to share those painful and precious shadows yet. Instead, she mediated and worked, and tried her best not to think of the man across the sea.

Il mondo
Non si è fermato mai un momento
La notte insegue sempre il giorno
   Ed il giorno verrà

Il Mondo – Jimmy Fontana

Ben watched his mother sleep. She had been talking about a benefit she thought they should organise to promote single parents in the communities they worked in, and she had gotten a little confused, and called him Han. Ben had frozen, as his mother’s eyes lost their focus and she reached out to grasp his hand. She was still talking to Han when she had nodded off, mid-sentence.
He had laid his notebook down, and pulled a soft, cashmere comforter over her legs, so thin they barely wrinkled the material of her trousers, so though someone had laid out empty clothes on the bed.

He put his hand on hers and tried not to think about all the time he had wasted. With the help of Dr Maz, he recognised the thought as being destructive, as soon as it entered his head. Yes, they had been apart, and he had missed out on spending more time with the astounding woman who was his mother, and yet, it couldn’t be changed now.

He was here now, and it had to be enough. He watched her, his heart sinking. He knew what the doctors said, and Leia was living on borrowed time. She was doggedly hanging there. Maybe she was making up for lost time as well, he thought with affection. It would be just like his mother to tell death to go keep busy until she was ready.

He stood up, scrubbing his hand over his face to chase away the grim expression that seemed to haunt him whenever he was faced with Leia’s mortality, so dangerously fragile now.

He remembered at the Christmas Gala with Rey, his mother’s hope and shining love for both of them, and Rey’s gentle suggestion that he ask her to dance. Now, he wished he had, when she had still been able to.

That evening, Ben sat with his mother while she ate a little soup, though the feeding tube in her arm did most of the eating for her now. After speaking with her nurse, he went to his room, and dressed in his best tuxedo, a crisp white shirt underneath and brushed his hair back, just as she liked it and went to Leia’s room.

“Really, I don’t see what all the fuss is about” he heard his mother’s smoky drawl coming from behind the dressing room door. He knocked quietly, and pushed the door open.

The nurse had helped Leia to thread a beautiful, silk watercolour kimono over her bedclothes, belted at the waist, it fell over her shrunken form in a waterfall of soft colours, her beautiful eyes, huge in her narrow face, a breathing tube still fixed under her nose, somehow, her regal bearing was undiminished, and she looked like a princess for a moment, from a galaxy far away. She looked up at him as he entered, and smiled down at her. Her hand fluttered to her chest.

“Oh my, what’s going on?” she murmured, with a smile, letting the nurse wind a matching silk headscarf around her bare head.

“Are you dancing?” he asked his mother, extending her his hand. A long tear dripped down her wrinkled cheek.

“Are you asking?” her voice wavered, filled with emotion, with a heartbreaking wonder, that her son had really come back to her. That he stood before her in his fathers footsteps, embracing his memory.

“Always” he said, and hoped his father wouldn’t mind him stealing his lines, as he carefully lifted his mother, light as a bird, into his arms, and waited as the nurse arranged whatever apparatus she needed, and then, he carried her carefully downstairs.

The formal room had been cleared of furniture, and lit with candles, as well as gardenias, Leia’s favourite flower. He carried her in and she looked around with such wonder on her face, he knew he would it forever remember.

The record was already playing on repeat in the corner, on the very same record player she used to
listen to it with Han.

Under the candle light, he held her close to his chest and moved in sweeping circles, spinning her until she laughed, dipping her as she managed to raise an unsteady arm over her head to create a graceful silhouette.

Ben didn’t know if she was dancing with him or with his father, maybe she didn’t either. Maybe it was both, and somehow, no matter what had gone between them, even through the veil of death, Leia had brought her two men together again.

He had missed so much, and yet, he was here now, and it was enough. He was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, please don't shoot... super sentimental and sad... i know - and really short! However, the next one is ready to go... and believe it or not... there might be actual interaction! It's still during the years apart, but hey... I live to break the rules))

If you enjoyed this wallow in melancholia, let me know!

Also, another shameless plug for a new short story, called Black Sheep - tropey but fun - Art thief Ben and the girl who is tracking him down -Rey. Part of the Reylo Parallel Universe collection.
When Rey came home to New York for Christmas, she practically jumped on Jack when she saw him waiting at the airport. Sporting only her back pack and tatty travel clothes, they had quickly been in his truck, heading home. Jack no longer lived in the care-takers cottage at all, it had all been passed onto a new family, and instead they went home to her old apartment in Brooklyn. He had fixed it up, bit by bit. She could relax there, there weren’t too many memories of Ben in those walls, a blessed relief. She saw her friends, Finn and Rose, better than ever, and Poe, no sign he had ever had such a brush with serious injury. They didn’t ask her about Ben.

A week before Christmas, she was trying to do some Christmas shopping, when her phone rang, and Luke’s voice spoke in her ear.

“Can’t even last a month without me?” she’d teased, and stopped in the middle of the street when he’s let out a long, sad sigh.

“What’s wrong, Luke, tell me”

“It’s Leia. She’s passed Rey.” He said heavily, and she went the air escape her chest.

“I’m… I’m so sorry” she whispered.

“I know. Me too. I’ll be coming over for the funeral. I just wanted to tell you” Luke said quietly.

The walk back to her apartment had felt endless. Finally, as she unlocked the door, and saw Jack, saw his red-rimmed eyes. Jack, who had gotten better, who looked so well, grieving his friend who hadn’t been so lucky.

“You heard?” he asked, seeing Rey’s pale face. She nodded, her face crumpling as her uncle put his arms around her and held her.

“I know she wasn’t doing that well, but, still… it’s sudden. She’d been at home a lot, not seeing guests…” Jack was saying, and Rey held him back, seeing how shaken he was.

“Are you going to go to the funeral?” Rey asked.
“Of course… the real question is, are you going to come with me?” he’d asked, as more tears filled Rey’s eyes. She nodded.

“Of course”

_Oh, lights go down_
_In the moment we're lost and found_
_And I just wanna be by your side_

_Birdy - Wings_

The church was packed, with the cream of New York society, or so Rey heard, not that she’d recognised many herself. Her and Jack had pressed in near the back, staring up along the endless pews, filled with mourners in black. There were flowers everywhere, and the smell was almost overpowering in the enclosed space. There was a strong note of gardenia, which Rey associated with Leia’s favourite perfume, and her hands trembled a little at the thought of Ben, picking out flowers that smelled like his mother.

Luke had entered, nodding hello to her, and gone to sit in the front, with Ben. She could barely see the top of his head, only managing that much because of his unusual height. There was another man, even taller than him in the pew beside them, and Rey wondered who he was, as Jack slipped a hand into hers, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“You ok?” he asked, perceptive as always. She nodded. She felt guilty, Leia had passed away, and all she could think off was seeing Ben. She took a deep breath, and pushed thoughts of herself away. This wasn’t about her, it was about Leia, and the incredible life she had led.

As the service began, and people got up to tell stories, share memories, Rey realised that Leia had been even more wonderful than she had ever guessed, and wished again she could have known her longer. She had been in the Peace Corps, there were pictures of her and Han, dressed in field fatigues, forest backdrops, grinning madly in a field of tents. There were pictures of her at demonstrations and marches, holding placards and shouting for causes most people would rather not bother with.

And then, a picture came on the screen, stunning in it’s beauty. Leia, in black and white, standing near a window, sunlight falling on her pregnant belly, looking down at the prominent bump with love, and then, Ben was standing up, and walking to the podium.

Rey swallowed hard, ignoring how her treacherous heart threatened to beat right out her chest. He was dressed in black, a common sight, and when he adjusted the microphone and looked up, she felt as though his eyes zeroed in on her instantly. She knew it was crazy, in such a busy room, with countless faces in between them, but she was sure in her heart, that he was looking at her, and couldn’t tear her eyes from his.

She could barely recall what he said, the sound of his voice mesmerising her. She brought herself
back with effort, focusing on his words. His eyes hadn’t moved as he finished his eulogy and soft music began to play.

“All I know for sure, is wherever they are, they’re together, and probably dancing, to this – their favourite song” He said roughly, his voice catching toward the end, and then, he was sweeping a hand through his hair, and stepping down, moving to the front end of the coffin, as nostalgic Italian music played softly. Along with Luke, the other tall man, and someone else, they lifted the coffin, and started down the aisle, slow, heavy steps.

Rey felt tears slide down her cheeks, and looked over to see Jack similarly affected. She took her uncles hand between hers, and promised herself never to forget how close she’d come to losing him, to appreciate him every day.

They drew abreast of them, and Rey couldn’t tear her eyes from Ben’s. His were rid-rimmed and tired, but dry, his mouth a straight line. As they passed, his eyes, tortured and expressive as always, flickered to hers. If he was indeed surprised to see her, there was no sign of it, as he watched her, and she watched him back, his fingers beside his face, white with strain on the gleaming coffin on his shoulder.

And then, he passed her and Rey stared at the people slowly filing out the pews to follow the coffin. Her heart felt wrung out, like a used paint rag.

The reception was in Leia’s townhouse, and Rey had debated with herself whether to go or not. In the end, she nursed a coke and looked at the pictures cluttering every surface, or Leia and Han, and Ben too. Luke was in them, as well as people Rey didn’t recognise.

“How are you holding up?” Luke asked, appearing at her side, holding a scotch on the rocks. She smiled at him and gave him a hug.

“Don’t worry about me… how are you?”

“Fine, or, I will be… in time. Where were you in the service? You should have been sitting with us” Luke said, turning to look far off through the connected rooms. Rey followed his gaze to Ben speaking with people a couple of rooms away, just a wavy brush of brown black hair visible. Just the merest glimpse of him, after so many months apart was overwhelming.

“That’s just for family” Rey said, distracted by the sight she had been longing for.

“Exactly” Luke muttered, adding more scotch to his glass from a table fairly groaning with bottles.

“Have you spoken to him?” Luke asked suddenly, and Rey shook her head.

“Have you?” She asked, and Luke echoed her headshake. He smiled at her.

“I guess we should work on courage, when we get home” he said slowly.

“I didn’t know you were on speaking terms” Rey observed.

“We aren’t really, well, better than we were, but not great”
“I don’t know if Leia told you that I had no idea you were Ben’s uncle, until a couple of months before I met you” she said, as they settled into a little corner, set up with leather armchairs, to talk.

“I wasn’t Ben’s favourite subject, so it’s hardly surprising.”

“You didn’t get on” Rey stated, but she could already guess the answer. There weren’t any people in Ben’s life he hadn’t isolated himself from, under Snoke’s influence.

“You could say that. I failed Ben, when he was just a boy. I left him alone when he needed me the most, and he has blamed me for it ever since.” Rey looked to Luke with a curious expression.

“It’s not the time or place to talk about it, but, I was at my height of fame then, and I got caught up in it all, and I forgot what was important and I looked away. I looked away, for just a moment, but it was enough.” Luke said, and Rey could see the shadow of pain on his brow.

“But, you’re here now” she said after a pause, and she saw Luke’s face soften a little at the words, a slight smile turning up the corner of his lip.

“You know, I don’t think there is anyone in Ben’s life that hasn’t failed him, except one, and I don’t need to tell you who it is” Luke said, that slight smile turning into a full blown one.

“He’s painting again, you know” Luke said, in a conspirational whisper, just as Ben appeared in the room closer to them, shaking hands with people giving him their condolences.

“Really?” Rey asked, smiling for real herself now.

“Really. If I hadn’t already known you, I would now” Luke said calmly, and Rey stared at him in surprise. She tucked the implications for that away for herself to treasure and pour over later.

“He showed you his work?”

“Hardly, I came across them, snooping as I am wont to do. I’m staying here too so…” he trailed off, taking another sip of his drink.

“When did you start speaking again?” she asked. Luke looked at her through narrowed eyes, seeming to weight something before coming to a decision.

“Recently”


“I don’t know if I should tell you, I don’t know how you’d take it” Luke said, and Rey felt the vague suspicions she hadn’t even realised she’d had falling into place.

“Before you wrote me that letter?” she tried, and Luke didn’t disagree.

“He asked you to invite me, free from the foundation, right?” she ventured, and Luke’s face confirmed her words.

“He asked for me to look at your work independently from the foundation, and decide based on merit, not just Leia’s recommendation. When I saw it, it was my idea to write to you, to offer you a job in return for tuition. Don’t be angry.” Luke said as he watched her carefully. She smiled sadly as she shook her head.

“I’m not. I’m… touched. It’s such a him thing to do. Be chivalrous and gentlemanly, when no one can see” she said, feeling those tears that had finally stopped, threaten to start again. Rey watched
Ben, indulging herself in the sight. Tall and striking, his imposing figure made him the focal point of any room he was in. She froze as Ben almost turned and saw her, and tightened her grip on her bag, pulling it up, onto her lap, and looking at Luke.

“He’d like to see you” his uncle remarked, and Rey realised how obvious her intention to slip away were.

“I’m not so sure. We never got our timing right. I hurt him deeply, and I don’t believe he thinks I haven’t failed him. I’m certain he thinks I abandoned him, when he needed me the most”

“I don’t know your whole history, but I did used to know that kid pretty well, and I am sure that everything you just said, is wrong.”

“I should go” Rey said again.

“I’ll be seeing you in Montemerano” Luke said, and Rey nodded.

“I’m so sorry, about Leia.” She said again.

“Thank you. She would be happy to know you’re here, though I am sure she would be mad at me for letting you leave before Ben knows you’re here.” Rey laughed at that, happy to see Luke’s version of Leia was as alive and robust as she had been when Rey had last seen her. She was sure that Ben already knew, but was unable to explain that spark of electricity that pulled them together.

She left then, ignoring that very pull, and how terribly much she wanted to see him. Today wasn’t about her, and she didn’t want to put any more upset on his shoulders. Her heels clacked on the tile floor of the town house and she looked at the pictures on the wall as she went. Ben was everywhere. While he might have shut himself away from his mother for many years, her heart had always been open to him, his home ready to welcome him back. It looked different to the last time she had visited, fresher, more modern. No longer just a mausoleum to the past but a real home.

She made it to the front door, hand on the knob, when she heard his voice.

“Leaving so soon?” he said, and she spun around, to see him in the door way of a darkened room to the right, leaning against the frame, hands in his pockets. His face was heartbreakingly familiar, and she just wanted to cup his cheeks and tilt it down it to hers. Instead, she held back and waited.

“I just wanted to be here… to say goodbye to your mother. I didn’t want to intrude. I know you must have your hands full” He just watched her, his eyes drinking her in thirstily like a man in a desert happening upon fresh water.

“I am ok. It sounds cold, but it might be the least cold I’ve felt in a long time.” He said, shifting his pose to stare up at a large picture in the hall, his mother and father, with a young Ben cradled in between them.

“I wanted to thank you, in fact.”

“Me? Why?”

“When my mother died, I was there. I held her hand, and she asked me to forgive her.” He said, a bewildered frown marring his brow, his voice was rough.
“What did you say?” Rey asked, transfixed.

“I told her I would, if she would grant me the same honour” he said, a quicksilver smile flashing across his face.

“I held her hand, and she died. She wasn’t alone, and neither was I. That was because of you” he fixed her with a look then, of such feeling Rey felt stripped to the bone, and as though Ben was seeing her very soul.

“Thank you for coming, Rey. She loved you very much”

“She was incredible.

“Yes, she was” he said, with a fainter smile. They held each other’s gaze for a long moment, until Rey realised that he was probably waiting for her to leave.

It was so bizarre, suddenly being in the same place as Ben, after so many months, after everything they’d shared, after the intensity of the end. Poe in hospital, and Ben broken apart. The miscarriage and the revelations. It had all pressed down on them, and that tentative bond between them had been stretched to breaking point. But now, seeing him again, feeling a magnetic pull toward his arms, to touch him, she realised that the bond hadn’t broken at all. The same thread that had tied them as teenagers, still remained, slowly healing from the damage their short and intense relationship had wrought.

“I should go” she said, clearing her throat, suddenly aware that the space between them was diminishing, without knowing who it was that was closing the distance.

“I wish you would stay a while longer, until the others leave, and then just the rest of the week.” Ben breathed, and reaching out a hand to touch her cheek. The thrill of the contact send her heart into her mouth.

“A year, at the outside, or ten” he said, running the pad of his thumb over her apple of her cheek.

“Twenty at the most.” he finished with a slight smile, tucking a hanging strand of hair behind her ear.

“You could stay forever” he said, and she heard that familiar longing in his voice. It swayed her and pulled her and tore her in two.

“Ben” she sighed, a longing, wistful sound. He smiled at her, and then, slowly dropped his hand, Rey missed it immediately.

The pull was enormous. Forget about Luke and Italy and paintings that weren’t honest enough. Come back to her friends and Jack and the city she knew and him, and who cared if they destroyed each other, at least they’d be together. She felt her bottom lip tremble and Ben’s face fell.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you, ever again, actually. I’ll let you get going. I want you to be happy Rey, more than anything else, I want that,” he said, pulling away from her and tucking his hands into his pockets. She lost her battle with the tears as a few leaked out, and she wondered when she would ever find the end of her well of tears for his man.

“You make me happy” she whispered, and he visibly tensed, his face hardened into lines of pain.

“But I also make you sad” he said, with finality and Rey looked away, at a framed poem, copied in beautiful calligraphy, with Ben’s name signed at the bottom. He murmured the last lines over her
shoulder.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

She swallowed hard, the haunting words all too close to home. She twisted her fingers around the strap of her bag, and risked a glance at him. He was looking at the poem, with a sad of sort wistfulness, and resignation.

“Luke told me you called him” she said, not meaning it as a reprimand, though he seemed to take it as one, looking down and away.

“I’m sorry” he said immediately.

“Why?”

“You’ll think I’m meddling in your life, trying to control you, so I can know where you are-” he said in a rush, before calming himself.

“That wasn’t why. You are so talented and Luke, we might find each other difficult to stomach, but he would be a great teacher for you. I didn’t know if you’d gone, I didn’t know if he’d contacted you… I just sent your pieces, your talent did the rest.”

“So, you haven’t known where I’ve been all these months?” she asked, understanding how difficult that must have been for him, someone so desperate to control things around him, to feel safe.

He shook his head.

“That can’t have been easy”

“It’s not supposed to be… it’s my punishment…” he said hollowly, as she looked at him in alarm.

“Punishment for what?”

“Hurting you, your friend… failing at everything…” he said in a brittle tone. He avoided her gaze as she turned fully to him.

“Ok, not punishment then, it’s the consequences of my actions, there, that’s better, isn’t it. I just have to live with it” he said tightly, and just then, someone called through to them from the other room. Ben looked over his shoulder, and back to Rey, suddenly seeming panicked.

“When do you leave?” he asked.

“Right after Christmas, the 27th” Rey said. Afterwards they stared at each other, a painful silence in which neither wanted to leave, but both knew they had to.

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep…” Ben quoted suddenly, and Rey’s pounding heart gradually settled.
“And miles to go before I sleep” she finished. They shared a look of understanding, and Rey knew that Ben was trying to get better, and she was trying to live for herself too. How easy it would be to fall back in what they’d had, pressing the same broken parts together and trying to make them fit. But they didn’t, couldn’t, not as they were.

“Well, Merry Christmas, Rey. Make sure you and Jack get a proper tree, and all that” he said, as the person calling him started toward them and she couldn’t stop herself from imagining him alone for the holiday.

“Are you – will you be alright?” she asked.

“Looks like Luke will still be here, so I won’t be… alone. Don’t worry about me”

“I will, when you stop worrying about me” she promised, and he nodded solemnly, though there was the slightest smile crinkling his eyes.

“It’s a deal”

Chapter End Notes

Poem - Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening - Robert Frost

You guys, the love for the last chapter has blown me away, thank you so much!

I know these ones are painful, and both our main characters are progressing and regressing and battling their issues, but they are getting there...

So... Reylo interaction for our starved hearts... but a little bittersweet.

Spoiler... the next chapter should cheer you up a little)) The Institute gets a surprise visitor ;)


January in Tuscany was cold, especially in the mornings, when Rey would wake early and sit on the roof with Luke, watching a slow, winter sunrise paint the sky, gripping her coffee and inhaling the steam curling off the top.

When she returned to Montemarano after New York, she continued her routine immediately. After they had sat peacefully for an hour or so in silence, Luke suddenly stood, dusting off his trousers and gestured to her.

She had followed him inside, and saw he was leading her to the studio. She had barely been in there since that fateful day she had stopped painting. Only to clean, and even then, she gave the art supplies only a custory glance.

Switching on the overhead lights, Luke set up two easels, side by side, and put paper on both. Rey had watched him anxiously. He had then picked up a pencil case of coloured pencils, and started to draw.

After watching him in silence for a long time, she crept closer, looking over his shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Now what… who” Luke corrected, and then Rey could see indeed that it was a person, gradually emerging from the rough shape of the crisscrossing lines on the canvas. He pointed to the wall opposite them, and Rey followed his gaze to see Luke reflected in a mirror, propped up.

“Sit, draw, don’t think” he instructed. Rey stood, frozen with sudden nerves. Being criticised by Luke and then, not drawing for so long had created some kind of barrier between her and her art, which had never been there before and she hated it.

“Don’t think” Luke said again, more forcefully this time, slapping a pencil into her hand. She sat stiffly before the blank page. Before, that blank white space had filled her with excitement. Now, it filled her with nerves. It was too empty, too open, there was too much space to fill.

“Draw what?”
“Draw what you see” Luke said, pointing again to the mirror, where Rey herself was now reflected.

She put her pencil onto the paper, and with the feeling off pushing a great boulder up a hill, started to sketch out soft lines, sloping and graceful. Luke grunted approval from beside her, and so, she continued. That static in her head that had been buzzing since she stopped painting, finally quieted.

She sketched on, not thinking too much, just following Luke’s direction.

An hour slid by, and then Rey because aware that Luke had finished his, and was reaching for the coloured pencils. He nudged the box in her direction.

“Good. Very good. Now, colour it in” he said. Rey stared at him. The exercise seemed more suited to school children.

“Don’t think. Colour what you feel” he said, and she saw him colouring his legs in a dark grey colour. She turned back to her sketch. And hesitated over what colour scheme to use, how to make it realistic or not, which colours would compliment each other.

“Rey – don’t think, just feel” Luke said again patiently. She nodded, trying to quiet her critical thoughts, reaching for a pencil, focusing on her body, and started to colour.

Another hour later, Luke put a cup of coffee in her hand, surprising her. She had been perfecting her picture, as terrible and nonsensical as it was, and had been totally absorbed. All thought had disappeared into the creation space in her head, where she moved instinctively.

Now, coming back from it, she wrapped her arms around her middle and stared at the picture. Luke sat down next to her and looked at it.

“That’s really good Rey. It’s a great start” he said.

“Start of what?”

“Art therapy” he said calmly. Rey stared at him, a little spark of anger flying through her.

“I never agreed for you to… analyse me… try out your techniques on me” she said.

“I know, but there’s no better way to learn than by doing an activity. That’s all we are doing… trying out the activities” he said in a soothing way, and Rey felt calmed by his explanation. It made sense, she supposed, and wondered at her defensive reaction.

“What do you see in that picture… if I asked you what that person was feeling?” Luke said, and Rey focused again on her picture.

“I don’t know… nothing really.”

“Nothing? The colours seem very purposeful to me”

“They weren’t”

Luke just looked at her a long moment.

“Ok, if someone else drew this, and I asked you what their body felt like… based on the picture, what would you say?” he said, settled back comfortably. Rey looked at the deep blue colour of the limbs on her picture of herself.

“What about their heads? What would you guess about that state of their thoughts, from the picture alone?” Rey chewed her lip as she stared at it. Something she had thought of as a random choice was hitting too close to home now.

“Dark… lost. Depressing thoughts… sadness” she said stiffly, but Luke didn’t comment, merely nodded.

“What about the chest area… red like blood… “

“It’s not the chest”

“No?”

“It’s the heart” she said, feeling tears press against the back of her eyelids.

“Why red?” Luke asked gently. Rey swallowed thickly. Being forced to say it, confront it in this unusual way was unravelling her barriers.

“Because… it’s bleeding. Broken” she admitted, a single tear dripping down her cheek as she gave Luke a lopsided smile through her tears. He looked at her with great compassion, and then, stood slowly from his stool, and enveloped her in his arms.

Ben

And at least I understood then the hunger I felt
And I didn’t have to call it loneliness

Florence and the Machine - Hunger

Ben shifted on the hard, plastic seat, trying hard not to stare at the people who were milling around
the coffee station. Dr Kanata had insisted that he was ready for a group environment, and he was hating every moment. Just when he had gotten used to speaking to her about his past, she wanted him to speak to a group of strangers.

5 more minutes, he promised himself, staring at the tiled floor under his feet. He would wait 5 more minutes, and then leave, if they hadn’t started yet.

A chair beside him squeaked a moment later, and then, he saw Maz herself bustling in through the back door, as tiny and shawl swathed as always.

“I am here, before any of you contemplate leaving” she called, her eyes finding Ben’s with a twinkle, and he shifted again, his long legs bent uncomfortably, his whole body radiating his awkwardness.

“She probably wasn’t speaking to you – it just always feels like it” a soft, female voice murmured beside him, and he looked up to see a woman smiling at him.

Her face was striking, her polished skin, dark and glowing, made the glimpse of her teeth blinding, revealed by the gentle curve of a generous mouth. She had long hair, braided and dyed, and unlikely white running through the ebony plaits. It should have looked strange, but it didn’t. It was unique and it suited her.

“I’m pretty sure this time she was…” he replied, uncrossing his arms from his chest, and giving a tight smile to the beautiful woman who had saved him from the painful awkwardness of being the new person.

“Naw, just feels like it. I promise. Gary over there has usually left by now. Don’t worry, we are a jumpy lot” she said, nodding her head to indicate a guy who was looking longingly at the door.

Ben felt an involuntary laugh slip from his mouth as he wondered if he had looked like that just a moment ago.

“Goes with the territory” she continued, and all positive thoughts fled Ben’s brain, as he stiffened, and dropped her open, almond shaped gaze. He swallowed hard. There it was, so casually put. They were all abuse victims, he thought dully, suddenly not sure he could meet any one’s eye. Then, Maz’s firm voice spoke up in his mind, they were all abuse survivors, she would say. That and… man up, Ben Solo, which was all him. He let out a long breath and glanced back at the woman beside him.

“Sorry” he said, and she nodded, understanding exactly what had been going through his head.

“It gets easier. Every time you talk about it, every time you make light of it, hell, every time you joke about it… it becomes just part of your past… just something that happened to you once. It stops being the thing that defines you.”

“Great, sign me up for that part. Can’t I just skip over this part and get there” he said, his mouth twisting into an approximation of a smile, which he was sure was more of a grimace. She smiled back sadly.

“I’m afraid you really can’t” she said, just as Maz pulled everyone’s attention to her at the front, clapping her hands for quiet.

“Ok, now, the first thing we are doing tonight is turning to the person on your right, and getting to know them a little. Favourite colour, food, worst haircut, best birthday… whatever you want… go!” she called.
Ben turned around a little in his seat, as the woman beside him gave a small, tinkling laugh.

“I’m Ahsoka by the way.”

“Ben”

“Nice to meet you, Ben” she said, her smile bleeding into her words, and she reminded him of Rey for a moment, sunny and bright, her slim hand extended to shake his.

He touched her fingers hesitantly, still so uncomfortable with the touch of a stranger. But her hand was soft and warm, and nothing like the cold, bony ones of his nightmares.

“Nice to meet you too” this time, his smile felt real on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone... copying and pasting my apology from my Black Sheep update, because it was hard enough to write the first time...

I'm so sorry for the slowness of updating, this... it's inexcusable (((

The only explanation I have is that sometimes, I get a little down, and everything is a little dark... and I can't write properly, or do anything properly.

I think it's passing. I'm trying hard to make it pass, which is a good thing that I even want it to, so... here we go... a little update, which I hope will get me back on track.

Thanks for reading and waiting and comments always make me smile xx

Also thank you so much to the people who checked in on me in the comments)))
Reylo fam is love x
Rey grunted with the effort of cleaning the muck from the bottom of the pool. Luckily most of the debris and leaves were dried into crisps that she could easily sweep up. However, there was a long streak of deep, soggy scum that was practically alive with insects and beetles along the very bottom, not to mention that the sides needed cleaned and the whole thing had an eerie, yellow-green glow that wasn’t very appealing.

She had promised herself that this year after the olive harvest, that she would be able to dive into a sparkling blue swimming pool. To keep that promise, meant that she would have to clean it out at some point. Luke had disappeared into town and so it fell to Rey, and she was determined to achieve her goal.

The late spring sun was high in the sky, the air fresh, filled with bird calls and the far-off sound of a rumbling tractor as the countryside came alive with the work of a new year.

She wiped her hands on her jean shorts and stepped back, skidding on a mushy patch of leaves, her breath shooting out as she fell on her bottom, hard on the tile floor. She sat there a long moment, pain ebbing, before laying back, letting her dirt streaked face tilt up to the sun, and relax a moment.

“Buongiorno” someone spoke from the side of the pool and Rey shifted her head around to see who had interrupted her quiet moment.

A man stood to the side of the pool. His dark hair glinted in the sunlight, his face tilted away from her, politely, as though he might be intruding. He held a large, leather bound notebook in his hand and a slim laptop. He had sunglasses perched on the top of his head.

“A man stood to the side of the pool. His dark hair glinted in the sunlight, his face tilted away from her, politely, as though he might be intruding. He held a large, leather bound notebook in his hand and a slim laptop. He had sunglasses perched on the top of his head.

“Hello” she replied in English, without thinking, and then man’s eyes darted to her, before shooting away.

“I’m looking for Luke Skywalker… sorry to interrupt” he said and Rey snorted as she pushed herself up, again wiping her filthy hands on her bare legs as she made her way over to the edge of the pool.

“You aren’t. Luke’s not here. Can I take a message?” she asked, curious about who this stranger was, unable to place his accent, though it didn’t sound quite Italian.

“I do not think so… when will he return?” he asked, turning to look at the gates, as though Luke
might just walk through them at any moment. Rey shrugged.

“He kind of keeps his own schedule” she said.

“I’m Rey, by the way” she said in the silence that fell. He crouched down and offered her his hand.

“Cassian” he said, and Rey lifted her own hand, before scrunching her nose at the dirt on it. He laughed, and took it anyway.

“A little dirt cannot get in the way of good manners, can it? Perhaps I could wait here for him to return?” he asked, and Rey nodded, liking him already. There was something warm and respectful about Cassian, and she watched him put down his things, and then start to unbutton his linen shirt.

“What are you doing!” she squeaked, quickly reversing her opinion. He revealed a plain white vest underneath, and moved to the edge of the pool.

“I can hardly sit here and not help you with your difficult task” he said, jumping nimbly down into the empty pool, grabbing the brush and shovel, and approaching the disgusting marsh in the middle of the space.

“You really don’t have to –” Rey protested lamely, intensely grateful for the help.

“It’s my pleasure, though, I only ask that one day I might swim to experience the fruits of my labour” he said with a grin. Rey found herself grinning back as she grabbed her industrial sized sponge and went back to the walls, and started scrubbing again.

“Whenever you want, the pool is yours”

Cassian was from Mexico City, he was a writer and he lived nearby. He had come to interview Luke about art for a magazine article, and it was the third time Luke had failed to show. Rey assured him it wasn’t because he was trying to be rude, but more, that he was a little scatter-brained.

They worked side by side late into the afternoon, laughing with each other and Rey found that Cassian had a lively sense of humour that took her by surprise. They had just finished the pool, a deep azure finally shining through the years of dirt, when a low whistle pulled her eyes to the gates.

“Wow, good job, kids. Pool looks great” Luke said, as he walked through, carrying a loaf of bread in a paper bag and a bottle of wine, looking as fresh as a daisy. Rey scowled at him.

“Your timing is impeccable” she muttered, and he let out a hearty laugh.

“It is rather, isn’t it. Don’t tell me – Cassian Andor – I forgot my interview again” he said, without the slightest sign of remorse.

“Yes, I’m afraid you did”

“Well, no matter, I’m sure Rey appreciated the hand. I have time now, if you still want to do it?” Luke said. Cassian glanced at the sky, no doubt judging the time, and nodded slowly.

“I believe we could make a start at least… however I am a little…”

“Filthy? Don’t worry. Rey, can you show Cassian to the shower room” Luke said, ambling off. Rey turned to her helper and gave him a smile.
“Follow me” she said, climbing up the ladder of the pool and walked toward the house.

Inside felt cool and it was dark, as she wound through the rooms, toward the guest room shower. She reached the door and opened it, turning to Cassian, finding him close behind her. It was unsettling, a sudden, male presence in her space. Someone who wasn’t Luke, not a father figure. Just a man. Just a very attractive man.

“Oh!” she breathed, bracing a hand on the door frame to balance, as she stepped aside for him.

“Here you go”

“Thank you, Rey” he said, with a warm smile on his handsome face, stepping past her, into the shower room. He closed the door gently and Rey leaned against the wall outside. She felt as though her brain was disconnected from her body. Towels, she realised with a start. She had just washed everything, and there wouldn’t be anything in the room. She went quickly to the laundry room, and pulled two fresh, lavender smelling towels from a pile and headed back to the shower room.

“Erm, Cassian?” she called through the door. She bent down to put the towels just outside.

“I’m just leaving the towels here” she was saying, as she straightened up, and heard the door open, the warm steam of the shower billowing out and over her face.

Cassian stood before her, his vest removed, his body slim and wiry, all toned, lithe muscles, a deep, golden brown.

He stared down at her, and she felt a hot liquid feeling shot through her at his warm, chocolate gaze.

“Rey?” he murmured, and she became aware of how hard she was staring at him.

“Towels” she blurted, her face turning scarlet under all the dirt and turned and scurried away, as Cassian stood in the doorway, watching her go.

She reached her room and tore off her clothes, letting them fall to the floor with a damp splat, and went straight to the simple little shower in her bathroom, and turned the water on, and the temperature down. She stepped in, grateful for the hard shock of freezing water. Her mind was being assaulted with images of the last naked chest she had seen. The last one she had wanted, longed to touch. White as marble, heavy and thickly muscled, broad and strong.

She rested her forehead against the cool tile of the shower, and took deep breaths, forcing her body into submission. She wasn’t cheating on Ben, thinking about another man, she told herself. She wasn’t doing anything wrong. She wasn’t a bad person. She told herself it over and over again. They were broken up. He wasn’t hers, anymore. She wasn’t his. She was her own.

Luke had made her address her feeling over Ben again and again in the last few months.

“You should get out there more Rey, meet people your own age. Date, have fun” Luke said, watching as Rey picked a new book to read on Saturday night, yet again.

“I’m not here for that. I’m just here to learn and grow…” she said, thumbing through the pages. Luke watched her for a moment longer, before reaching out and touching her arm.
“You’re hiding Rey.”

“No, I’m not” she had said irritably, shrugging his fingers from her arm.

“Yes, you are. You and Ben are finished. That’s what you told me”

“I know” she said through gritted teeth.

“That’s what he told me” Luke said gently, and Rey tried to ignore the pain in her heart at his words. She avoided Luke’s probing look.

“You don’t have to feel guilty about living your life. Ben wanted you to be happy, wasn’t that the whole point of everything?”

“Stop” Rey warned as she stood up, taking her book with her to read somewhere else.

“You wouldn’t be betraying him, Rey.” Luke said, and she let out an incredulous scoff at his words.

“I left him alone, when his mother died, when it got hard, all this time. If that’s not betraying someone, we have different meanings of the word” Rey said, about to leave, as Luke grabbed her hand, stilling her.

“Rey, you didn’t abandon Ben. You are not your mother. Ben let you go, because he loved you, and he didn’t want to hurt you. Ben needed to let you go. Now, you need to let him go”

A knock at the door sounded, and Rey jumped, suddenly coming back to her chilled flesh and the freezing shower. She twisted the tap off.

“Yes?”

“Rey, do you think we can scare up dinner for Cassian, I’ve invited him to stay” Luke called. Rey stared at herself in the mirror as she wrapped her towel around her.

“Yes… I’ll find something” she said numbly, her heart picking up again, as she contemplated getting back under the cold water.
“I’ll pick you up at 7, if it suits” he said, his mind absent as he flicked through his calendar, looking at the meetings he had coming up in the next few weeks. The youth project they were launching in Rey’s old neighbourhood was exciting, as was the expansion of the martial arts programme, and he had several other gyms he was meeting to convince them to donate time and space to the initiative.

“Don’t sound too excited” Ahsoka’s voice was light, but there was hurt under her words, and Ben focused on it, turning away from his laptop and calendar, making his mind focus on the woman who was waiting on the other end of the phone.

“I’m sorry. I am excited, I love the opera” he said, a memory of his mother drifting through his mind, and all the times she had taken him as a young child, as Han could never be convinced. But Ben had always been happy to accompany Leia. They would get dressed up and go for dinner before, and then, into the Organa-Solo box at the Met. His mother would take out her pearl handled glasses and they would look at the program together. She loved it all, the music, the passion and the romance, and Ben loved her. He hadn’t been in too long, and now, taking Ahsoka, knew that Leia’s ghost would be in the box with them. He wondered what she would think of this highly unusual and captivating woman who had come into his life. He hoped desperately she would have approved of him trying to make a life, trying to continue on, at the very least.

“Well, not all of us have been before…” Ahsoka reminded him, and he smiled at the thought of giving her that experience.

“It’ll be wonderful, I promise” he said, seeing Hux come to the glass door of his office. How he had ended up living two lives and having two companies that involved Armitage Hux, he didn’t know, but there is was. Hux stepped inside and put a heavy folder down on the table before Ben, and sat before him.

“I better go, Hux just came in and is looking at me disapprovingly.” He smiled as she bid him goodbye and hung up.

“Was that Ahsoka?” Hux said without preamble. Ben nodded shortly, and Hux frowned.
“Is that still going on? She deserves better, Ben” Hux said, and Ben sighed. Hux’s opinion of his new relationship was no secret.

“Our relationship is not… what you think” Ben said, reaching the extent of what he could bare to reveal to Hux.

He remembered how Ahsoka had called him after the group where they had met, and gotten on so well. She’d asked for his number and he had been surprised into giving it to her. Then, he’d been surprised again when she’d called, and even more so when she’d invited him out for dinner. He had gone, not sure what to expect.

“Relax, Ben, I’m not punking you” she had laughed, as he had sat uncomfortably in the dinner place.

“So you say, but why else would we be sitting here?” he’d asked, taking a quick sip of wine to calm himself. He was nervous about what she wanted, why she was trying to spend time with him, what expectations she had, and how he would inevitably end up failing to meet them. The fear he had been harbouring rose up and he was unable to stop the words spilling out.

“I’m not looking for a relationship… you know, a romantic one” he’d said bluntly. She had watched him appraisingly.

“Why not?” she’d asked, and it wasn’t the question he’d anticipated. He shrugged.

“I’m just not”

“Very evasive of you” she’d remarked.

“Ok, fine… I’m not- I’m not a whole person… I can’t be a whole person for anyone… so it wouldn’t be fair” he tried to explain, but the words didn’t make sense.

“The good parts of me… the unbroken part… belongs to someone… a woman… and it can’t be gotten back. It’s hers… to keep” he tried again, and turned his face from her inquisitive stare.

“For how long?” she’d asked, and in her simple question, Ben felt the truth of his answer in his bones.

“Always” he had replied, and Ahsoka had nodded slowly.

“I enjoyed your company the other night, I just thought that you – could use a friend… and so could I” she said, and his eyes had flown to hers, trying to see the truth there. But there was no deception, and he had felt the first stirring of hope.

He came back to Hux and his probing glare and sighed.

“I’m being good to her, the best I can be. Better than I’ve ever been to… anyone” he said and her name lingered unspoken in the air between the two men. Hux’s hard eyes softened a little at Ben’s obvious pain.
“Ahsoka is an amazing woman, who has overcome so much… she doesn’t deserve to be runner up to anyone”

“She’s no runner up. I’m – alone. I’m not spending time with anyone else and Rey - Rey is gone” Ben said, hearing the words out loud always paining him.

“Is she?” Hux pressed, his eyes flickered to a framed photo on Ben’s desk. Graduation day Rey and Ben, two children who fell in love and never fell out, who never learned how.

“Talking of Rey – Luke Skywalker called for you. Margot forwarded the call to me, she knows how sensitive your relationship is…”

“What did he want? What’s wrong??” Ben interrupted rudely, his dark eyes flashing immediately with concern. Hux stared at him, his blue eyes narrowing on the picture of tension Ben had become in the space of a heartbeat.

“She’s gone, is she? Don’t lie to yourself. Anyway, just foundation stuff. Don’t get excited.” Hux said critically, before handing over a hand scribbled note.

Rey

Cassian Andor was unlike any man she’d ever met. He was warm and caring, and he expected nothing from her. If he saw her, he was happy and he was unworried about time apart. The first night he had stayed for dinner with her and Luke, drinking wine and eating good food under a purple sunset, laughing and talking late into the night.

He had kissed her goodbye, a kiss intended for her cheek, but she had turned her face at the last moment, and their lips had touched.

He was gentle, frustratingly so at times, but he was sweet.

Rey took to walking up through the woods to his secluded little cottage where he wrote. They wiled time away there, in front of his fire, when the night got cold, or out on the patio, Cass writing and Rey reading everything she could on Art Therapy.

He never pushed for more, and it was Rey herself who finally lifted his hand to touch her, her body burning for something more, for comfort and touch and companionship. Ben had awoken her body, and now, she almost felt betrayed that it continued to want human contact, without him. But that was the truth.

She yearned for physical contact, to feel again, and Cassian was a gentle and caring man. If she sometimes saw a larger silhouette in the firelight, or felt the ghostly grip of phantom fingers, that needed her, burned for her, so unlike Cassian’s soft caresses, she could ignore them for the most parts. Except for some nights, when that lonely place inside howled for it's partner, and nothing but the memories of him could soothe her, even as another man held her in his arms. She knew it
wasn't fair, but she wasn't the only one with secrets.

She never pried into what had brought Cassian into voluntary seclusion, just knew that there was a sadness in him, a deep, fathomless pool. Together, they brought each other comfort for heartbeats of time at once, and never worried too much when they were apart. The relationship was one of more than friends, and less than lovers, and it was all Rey could handle at the moment. It was not for them, to share secrets, to confess troubles, and Rey accepted that. There was only one man who understood the tune of her soul, and he was a world away.

In the comforting rhythm of life at the Institute, she went through different art therapy exercises with Luke, and felt when her heart started to forget the pain that loving Ben had wrought. Thinking of him no longer crippled her with sadness, it no longer stole her breath away and made her physically ache to be so far away.

One thing remained though, and that was the guilt. Everything else aside, Ben had been the missing part of her soul, and she had left him alone, when he had needed someone. When he had needed her. She could never shake the guilt of that.

This weekend, she had meant to go into Florence, and once more walk the museums of art that she loved. She had set off for the train station late though, and even with a last minute moped ride from Paolo, she had missed the train. Even going to Florence, Cassian hadn’t suggested he come with her and Rey hadn’t thought to ask. That wasn’t what they were to each other.

She returned to an empty villa and changed into work clothes, and went to the olive grove. Summer was in full swing, and the hot sun beat down on her, burning her skin, revealed in patches through the dappled awning of leaves above her. Only the thought of the cool swimming pool kept her going for more than an hour, until the sun had passed its zenith and started down the other side.

Taking off her rough gloves and dropping her oversized straw hat on the ground, she walked toward the swimming pool, sliding down her shorts and pulling her t-shirt over her head, tossing it to the ground and toeing off her flip flops.

It might be disgusting to go in the water all sweaty, she thought, but she was alone, and she didn’t care. It’s not like anyone else cleaned the pool, she reasoned as she approached the burning hot edge of the pool, her bare feet scalding on the hard stone, and looked into the aqua depths, before jumping unceremoniously in. She splashed loudly, and let herself sink under the water, the cool rushing over her in a grateful wave.

She surfaced at length, and straight away drew a deep breath, and went under again, pushing her body into a quick crawl, as she did a fast, seamless 5 lengths, before flipping onto her back and staring up at the sky. Her love of swimming had returned with a bang, forgotten since high school, she now relished every opportunity.

She floated on her back, her eyes drifting open and closed, chasing clouds as they drifted past her eye line. From afar, she heard the sound of a car stop, and footsteps crunch over the gravel of the drive.

“Rey? I thought you were going to Florence?” Luke said, his dusty sandals stopping beside her head for a moment. Rey blinked up at him, surprised to see him wearing his smartest looking clothes, which, given that it was Luke, still weren’t all that smart, but still.

“Missed the train, I decided to come and get some of the olives picked…. And got too hot” she
said with a sigh.

“Why does everyone always complain about the olives, it’s really not that hard work”

“I don’t see you volunteering to help” Rey muttered, swirling the water with her hand, drawing her fingers through the silky cool liquid.

“I don’t think he ever has, even when it meant leaving a skinny 12 year old the entire grove to do” the heartbreakingly familiar voice sent Rey sitting up, and, being that it was water under her, and not a chair, sinking down instantly. Her only glimpse of the owner of the voice was an impression of a tall figure, standing beside his uncle, looking down at her, a long, pale face framed by dark waves, with sunglasses perched atop his nose.

Then, she was swallowing water. Her feet touched the bottom, and she shot up, coughing and spluttering, rubbing the chlorine from her eyes to see for herself the ghost, much missed, who had come to visit.

And then, with her hair askew, eyes burning and snot running from her nose, her shoulders and chest sunburned in patches and an ancient, withered bikini on, one which she used as underwear on laundry days, her feet found the bottom of the pool and she looked up at him, Ben Solo, in the flesh.

“Hello Rey” he said softly.

“Ben” she breathed.
Now, I'm a little scared here... of upsetting people... but here we are. Rey and Ben are trying to move on from each other, and other people will be involved in that. I always planned for them to be apart, and for Rey especially to experience normal, healthy relationships/sexual experience - separate from Ben.

I think the most romantic thing in the world is having all the choices and experiences open to you, and still choosing to be with someone... over having no choices and choosing the person.

This fic took a different, more real and angsty direction as I wrote it, and I don't feel like it's genuine to their characters now to imply that young, healthy people with libidos and social lives would go years on end without meeting someone else. Maybe not love, but physical intimacy... yeah, just my 2 cents.

I hope you can stick with me and see where we are going with it! I have a plan... trust me))
The years apart part 6

She couldn’t stop staring at him. His crisp suit, fitted to the lines of his powerful body. The way his hands were casually tucked into his pockets, until he walked over to the pool ladder and offered her a hand up. Those long, pale fingers, held out in the air for hers.

His face was difficult to read behind the glasses and she felt more than exposed as she climbed out the pool, water sluicing off in all directions, and climbed the steps, her eyes fixed on the floor.

Not the best day to look like a drowned rat, she thought miserably, though it was hard to be upset. Ben was here, that made it the best day, no matter what she looked like. Should she feel this wild and giddy joy seeing him? She didn’t know. If she had predicated it, she probably would have gone with nervous or sad… but happiness was the real answer. Ben, whole and well before her, laid to rest worries she hadn’t even realised were sitting on her shoulders.

She stood dripping on the tiles, as the hot sun lit up the drops of water on her skin, and she felt it, the most over powering emotion so far – relief.

“Were you sending me off to Florence to get me out the way today?” Rey demanded, frowning at Luke. He returned her look calmly.

“I didn’t want to upset you – either of you”

“Do I look upset??” Rey demanded, at once realising how upset and aggressive her tone sounded, as Luke seemed to think over how to answer that.

“Kind of?” he offered, and Rey laughed, the tension releasing from her chest.

“That’s just with you… not, in general” she muttered, as Luke chuckled too, and she finally brought herself around to face the person who had been staring a hole into the side of her face.

She looked up into his face, braced, as always, against the impact that visage from her memories and her dreams had on her, and as they stood, wordlessly staring at each other, time slowing down and spinning out, endless fathoms of nothingness in the face of all that was between them, Luke cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Well, I’m just going to go into the office and get… started. Ben, join me when you’re ready” Luke said gruffly, turning toward the house, and hesitating a little. Rey, able now to read him like a book, never took her eyes from Ben.

“Second door past the kitchen” she reminded him. Ben’s full mouth quirked into a lopsided smile as Luke moved away, into the house.

“Please tell me he didn’t just forget where his own study was”

“I’ve never seen him in there, which makes sense, as he never really seems to work either, so I’m really not surprised.” Rey said with a sigh. The late afternoon breeze was balmy, with a hint of hot, and perfumed strands of lavender and verbena drifted past them. Ben finally shifted his gaze to the pool.

“You cut your hair” she blurted out, and watched as his hand moved self-consciously to the back of his neck, rubbing the newly exposed skin there. His face was clean shaven too, and Rey thought he looked younger, fresher.
“I thought it was time for a change” he said, and glanced up at her.

“Is it – ok?” he asked, and Rey couldn’t stop the laugh from slipping out. His hand froze on his neck, as he jumped to the conclusion that she didn’t think so.

“It’s great. It looks great… you look great” she said, finding herself stammering a little. He smiled back at her.

“When did you cut it?”

“Spring, I think”

“And you waited this long to ask someone if it looked ok?” she mused, and he shrugged nonchalantly.

“It didn’t occur to me to worry about it before” he admitted, and that simple admission made her heart pound for a moment. They resumed their silent inspections.

“Take off your glasses” Rey instructed, folding her arms across her chest, suddenly sure Ben’s eyes were looking wherever they wanted under the guise of dark lenses, while hers were restricted to his face. He pulled them off, folding them and placing them in his breast pocket.

“Bossy today” he murmured, and Rey drank in the sight of his eyes, hazel in the sun-flooded courtyard. There was a jolt, like electricity, as their eyes met. Over half a year had passed since the afternoon of Leia’s funeral and Ben had been a taciturn and polite son, holding together a deep and ragged sadness. Now though, Rey could see him again, just the smallest, tiniest glimpse of her Ben, and her lips curved in a smile that had only ever been reserved for him.

“There you are” she breathed. His eyes crinkled at the corners as his own smile stretched across his face.

“Hello” he said.

“Hi” she replied, almost bouncing on her toes with energy, both revelling in the novelty of seeing each other suddenly and unexpectedly.

“Ben! I’m not getting any younger! Let’s get started, and come help me turn the computer on, damn thing” Luke called from inside and Rey clapped a hand over her mouth to contain the giggle that welled up.

“I think he found the office” Ben said dryly,

“I better go and help… will you…” he trailed off, watching as Rey snapped out her stupor and went to grab her towel from a lounger, wrapping it around her middle, and leaned over, squeezing water from her hair.

“I’ll be here.” She confirmed, and his face lightened at her words. Smiling, he nodded and went inside, and Rey watched, committing every moment to memory.

Hours later, once she had showered, dried her hair in loose waves, falling down her back and put on a little make, she stood on the threshold of her room, unsure where to go and how to approach him
again. It was one thing coming across him by surprise, she’d had no time to get nervous and over think things. Now, she had had several hours to agonise over seeing him again. She had looked at herself in the mirror, wondering if he noticed the differences in her. More muscular from all the hard labour she was doing, more tan, her nose covered in even more freckles than before, and her hair, uncut for almost a year, was brushing her mid-back.

She put on a vintage teal sundress, soft and a little floaty at the hem. It was an old dress Luke had dug out the extensive store rooms here at the villa. It made her skin even more golden. It buttoned up the entire front, had capped little sleeves, a deep v, nipped in waist before flaring out a little to a mid-calf length. It was silk with mother or pearl buttons, and Rey loved it, though, she worried she’d look overdressed for hanging out around the villa.

She heard the murmur of male voices outside her window, and went to the Juliet balcony, looking down. She saw the top of Luke’s head, turned toward the house, speaking to someone, hidden by the trailing ivy that hung from the balcony. Suddenly, she realised she had been hiding so long that Ben might be leaving. With that terrifying thought, she spun on her heel and quickly descended through the house, following the sound of soft voices, bare feet slapping on the tiles.

She stepped out into the sweet Tuscan night, and saw him. His suit jacket was slung over his shoulder, his white shirt still crisp despite the long, hot day. As she approached silently, he turned immediately, as though drawn by something that only he could hear. She saw the very moment he saw her, the reaction in his eyes to her, a slight widening, a miniscule parting of his lips in awe, appreciation. No matter what had gone between her and Ben, he had always made her feel like the only woman on the planet, and now was no exception. She offered him a wide smile, and he responded, his lips curving a little, though he was soon distracted by Luke. She reached the doorway and stepped out onto the gravel, turning to see who they had been speaking to, and froze.

Cassian stood in the evening shadows, his easy smile blossoming as he saw her. Dressed in a simple black t-shirt and jeans, he was all casual ease, while Ben was coiled curiosity and restraint. She didn’t look at Ben, as she forced a smile for Cass.

“Speak of the devil” Luke said, easing back as Rey stepped from the door.

“Rey, I came to see if you fancied dinner, I didn’t know you had company” Cassian said, and Rey felt like she was under a microscope, as she stood between the important men in her life, all she needed was Jack and Finn there and it’d be complete.

“It’s alright, no need to change your plans. I have an early flight” Ben was saying, and Rey struggled to hear his real emotion in his voice. Did he really not mind? She couldn’t reconcile that with the Ben who had just looked at her like she was his own personal sunrise.

“I – I had thought about showing Ben the village” she said, twisting her hands, the old nervous habit popping up again.

“You could show him together” Luke said, and Rey resisted the urge to smack him in the head, settling for merely fixing a withering glare on him.

“Actually, I should probably get to work… I’m working on an interview that is unforgivably late. My editor will not be happy with me” Cassian said, after watching Rey’s reaction closely. She gave him a look of pure gratitude as he bid Luke and Ben goodbye, and started toward the gates.

“Just a minute” she said as she took off after him. She caught up with him just around the corner, out of sight of the villa courtyard.
“Hey –“ she called, and he stopped immediately, his hands in his pockets, he turned and gave her a
tired smile.

“It’s ok, Rey… go and have fun with your friend” he said, and Rey felt a surge of affection for this
man who had done nothing but support her in the long months of her heartbreak.

“I’m sorry – he’s… he’s the reason I’m here. He’s.. the reason for everything” she said haltingly.
Cassian nodded, reaching out and pushing the heavy curtain of her loose hair over her shoulder, his
hand brushing a light caress onto her shoulder.

“I guessed as much… I saw his face, when he looked at you. I might not be the most romantic
man in the world, but I know love when I see it”

“You are romantic…” Rey argued softly and Cassian huffed a laugh.

“There has been little romance in our time together, companionship, affection… pleasure,
undoubtedly… but little romance… and no love… I am not wrong Rey, am I?” he said. Rey
steeled herself, and gently shook her head, but was relieved to see that Cassian wasn’t upset.

“If I had met you before, maybe I could have been a better man for you, someone you could love.”

“What happened to you?” she asked, crossing the unspoken line they had always danced around.
His eyes flashed with a strong emotion for a moment, before he gave her crooked smile.

“Love happened… what else can removed a person’s soul in its violent aftermath?” he said
musingly.

“Is she… I mean, how come it didn’t work out?” she said, almost afraid to hear the answer. He
shrugged, but she could see the casual movement was a pretence.

“We were from different worlds, she wasn’t mine to begin with… what we had was stolen time,
and I have paid the price for having that time with her… we both have” he said heavily, and Rey’s
heart broke a little for him. She thought of her own battered and bruised heart, only now beginning
to repair itself, only now finding her own feet to stand on, her own story to tell.

“Do you regret it?” she whispered, wondering what her life would have been without the hurricane
of Ben Solo, someone who had swept her away, spirited to her heights of emotion she hadn’t know
existed, and left devastation in the aftermath.

“Not for a moment, I would live a hundred years alone, to have had that time with her.” He said
with a certainly that made Rey smile.

“Lucky girl” she said, and Cassian pulled her close, and pressed a kiss on her forehead.

“No, it is I who was lucky, and Ben as well. Now, go and make the most of your time together, and
don’t think about tomorrow. Live while you can… pick up the pieces later.” He said, and Rey
pressed herself into his arms, comforted by this person who had been at her side and in her bed for
months, and she was only now beginning to truly understand.

“What about after?” she asked, her voice muffled, but a little afraid, as she voiced her biggest fear.

“I’ll be here.. to help you rebuild” he promised. Rey pulled back and gave him a smile.

“You are good to me” she said honestly.
“No less than you deserve” Cassian said, and pulled away.

“See you soon Rey” he promised, stared away down the road, his hands back in his pockets.

Rey took a deep breath, Cassian’s words swirling through her mind as she turned toward the villa and started back toward Ben.

He was sitting outside the door to the house, his elbows braced on his knees, his attentive gaze trained on the gates. He straightened up as she stepped through, and made her way over to him.

“Sorry” was all she said, as she sat down next to him, too far to touch, but could still feel the intense warmth of him down the side of her body, despite the meter that separated them.

“I wasn’t sure… you’d come back” he said honestly.

“Really? You can’t think I’d miss dinner with my favourite Skywalker-Solo men” she said lightly. He let out a reluctant laugh.

“Actually, I think Luke might have finally developed some tact and taken himself off… it’s just us, kid” he said. Rey’s heart stuttered. He was so different and so familiar all at once.

“Well… what do you want to do?” she asked and immediately reddened as her thoughts strayed to all the ways they could spend the time.

“I heard mention of a village tour… though I’m not sure I am not the more qualified guide, being that I did spend every summer here for 10 years” he said, saving her from embarrassment. She nodded, standing up.

“Yes, but the village you knew… it’s gone Ben. Progress has swept in, and you won’t recognise it. I mean, Rosa’s restaurant has a green awning now, and I have it on good authority it used to be blue. Lorenzo’s Tabbaci now sells an English paper – just one, but still – massive changes. The post office – has a new ticket machine” Rey said with deadly seriousness. Ben matched her gaze, his eyes widening at her last revelation.

“My god, does it speed things up”

“Not in the slightest”

“Some things never change” he remarked, a wry smile touching his lips.

He looked delighted in that moment, to share jokes and insider knowledge on the town he had spent so long in, the town that had been his refuge from his life in America, and the monster who had waited for him there. He looked most delighted to be sharing it with her, seeing her love of the little sleepy village in her eyes.

“I just need to get my purse” Rey said.

“You give the tour of this new, modern town, I’ll get dinner” he suggested, standing and brushing off his dress pants. They stared at each other again, both completely absorbed with the strangeness of being close enough to touch again, after so long.

“That was Leia’s dress” he said suddenly, and Rey stared down at the beautiful garment, surprised.

“I had no idea! I’ll take it off-“ she offered, suddenly wondering if seeing her in it was making Ben
relieve painful memories.

“Don’t. It looks perfect on you. She would be happy… to see you in it. To see me here, after so long… to know we were here together” he trailed off, seeming to lose his train of thought as his eyes moved up and down her.

“I’m hungry” she announced, wishing to break the tension that built between them in every charged silence.

“Some things never change” Ben repeated with a grin, and offered her his elbow. She slipped her arm in the crook of his unthinkingly, taking her place at his side, and together they walked through the gates of the villa.

As they walked through the streets of Ben’s childhood, he tried hard not to let his eyes linger too long on Rey as she laughed and smiled, generally light up every room she passed through. He tried not to let his touches last too long, her hand over a rough cobblestone, her back where it pressed against the chair as he pushed it in at the dinner table.

He tried to put the earlier and the uncomfortable situation with the writer Cassian out his mind, but it was proving impossible. Rey talked about daily life at the villa and he had a wild impulse to miss his plane the next day. To stay under the same roof as Rey, a deep, dreamless sleep in cotton sheets that held the perfume of the gardens trapped inside. Tomorrow he’d turn off his phone and chuck his laptop away, and go with her to the olive groves, help her harvest the hard, shiny olives under a sweltering sun, and throw her in the pool on the way back, jumping in afterward. At night he’d cook Fiorentina outside over the grill and they’d eat under the canopy of stars, and then go to sleep, and wake up and do it all over again. He could leave his life in New York, leave Hux in charge, get Margot to close up the townhouse and just stay.

“Sticking with the classics?” he murmured, as Rey ordered the very same dish he had long ago introduced her to. She smiled happily, taking a hearty sip of wine, her bright eyes moving around the bustling courtyard of the trattoria they were sitting in.

“So, tell me about New York, and First Order… and all of it” she said turning back to him with a determined face. He sighed, knowing she’d be curious, but wondering how much detail to go into.

The story took them through dinner and well into desert, where Ben watched Rey delve into his left-over tiramisu with delight. He told her about his work now, the foundation, about therapy, and Dr Kanata.

Finally, he made himself tell her about Snoke and Hux. Rey’s face drained of colour as he spoke, his memories from that night unclouded by time.

“And so –“ Rey trailed off, prompting him to finish the macabre tale, and he found the words he had been dreading confessing suddenly bursting off his tongue, relieved to finally be free of the burden, confessing to the only person whose opinion mattered.

“So… I watched him die, I let him, I – I murdered him” he said quietly, his eyes dropping to his hand on the table cloth, clutch around the stem of his wine glass.
“No, Ben. You just didn’t try and save him”

“It’s the same thing Rey.” He insisted, looking up at her, willing her to understand.

“I need you to acknowledge that.” He said, and saw how she nodded softly, reaching out her slim, tanned fingers to rest on his forearm, hard with tension.

“Ok, I acknowledge it. I don’t care. You did the right thing. I’m glad he’s dead” she said simply, lightening his heart, lifting a weight he hadn’t known he was carrying from his shoulders. The darkness in Rey complimenting his own tarnished soul. As much as she was a creature of light, she had known darkness and carried the shadows of it. Within that gloom, she found her ability to feel compassion for a wretched man. He sagged forward a little.

“You carried out the sentence. A sentence he had earned himself, with his actions over a lifetime.” She said further.

“How does Hux figure into all this?” she asked, and Ben debated a moment what to say, and in the end, decided on the truth. Rey deserved that much from Hux, from how he had treated her in high school, still unforgiven. Rey’s mouth dropped open in shock as Ben told her of Hux’s revelations. Colour rose in her cheeks and her eyes glittered a little as her hand tightened on his arm.

“He could have saved you… he owes you more than he can ever repay for being such a coward” she muttered angrily.

“Not everyone is as brave as you, kid” Ben said, she looked away, still angry, and she was magnificent. He wished he had sketching implements to hand, to capture that righteous, Valkyrie wrath that painted her features, for him, in his defence.

“Enough about me, I want to know about you and Luke, the institute and painting, and -” he said, a glaring omission settling between them.

“And, Cassian?”

“Him too” Ben said roughly, taking a steadying sip of wine to hide his panicked expression. Rey watched him carefully, before dropping into the familiar.

“Well, one thing is for sure, Luke doesn’t know anything other than art” she started.

They finished their meal and left the little eatery, strolling along in the pleasantly warm evening air, Rey hanging on his elbow, and him, trying not to dwell on how precious it felt, her skin against his, her slight weight sometimes bumping into him as they walked, her tinkling laugh.

“What business was it you had with Luke?” she asked, as they started down the dirt road toward the villa, unable to prolong their evening meander further, as deep starlit darkness spread out overhead and true night fell on them.

“I had to go over some new requirements with him, concerning ownership of the villa, rights of the institute, now the foundation has undergone major changes. Boring stuff, but quickly concluded”

“So… who owns the villa? The foundation?” she asked, immediately latching onto the pertinent part.

“Not anymore. It complicated. It’s an asset, it needs reassigning, and for tax purposes…” he evaded, hoping she’d drop the subject.
“Ok, forget I asked.” Rey laughed and they continued on in companionable silence.

“Are you really going home tomorrow?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes, I’m afraid I must.” He said, picking over the stones of the path and holding Rey close in case she fell.

“That’s a shame” she murmured, and his skin prickled at her words, at the breathless kind of hope that flared in his chest at her meaning. He stopped, and looked down at her, only a dim outline in the dark, unlit path.

“Is it?” he asked softly. Rey stared up at him, a long moment, before speaking.

“I wish everyday could be like this” she said wistfully, and he knew what she meant. Care free and happy, without responsibility of the foundation and jobs, of dreams and ambitions. Without the long shadow of the past and its ghosts casting a pall over the present.

“Me too” he agreed, and they shared a sad smile, one that knew it could not be.

“Cassian – he seems like a good man” Ben said stiffly, breaking the spell that had woven between them. They still hadn’t discussed the fact that Rey had a new boyfriend, and Ben had had to stand and listen to Luke prattle on about how much time the two of them spent together.

“He is” Rey said shortly. They walked on together, and Ben fought down the raging jealousy that threatened to erupt at the thought of Rey touching another man, another man making her laugh.

“I’m glad.” He struggled to get it out, those untrue words.

“You don’t sound it” Rey said.

“I’m not… sorry. I should have said, I’m glad you are happy. I’m glad you are not alone. That’s something I can mean” he rephrased. Rey glanced up at him, her eyes twinkling a little as she smiled.

“Maybe therapy really is working for you, I’m impressed. I, on the other hand, feel like I’m failing Art therapy, and if you tell me you have another girlfriend too, right now, I won’t be responsible for my actions” she warned, with a jagged laugh, that sounded more pained than amused.

“So, he is your boyfriend?” Ben pressed, unable to hear anything except that comparison. Rey sighed.

“Oh, Ben” she murmured as they reached the gates of the villa. She looked up at him with worry, her features softened by the lamp light of around the villa. He couldn’t bare that look for a moment, and words rushed up all at once.

“I’m not – alone either, you don’t need to worry about me. I’m seeing… someone” he said, feeling the desperately awkward words fall between them. A flash of pain crossed Rey’s eyes, before she nodded.

“I’m glad” she echoed his previous sentiment, he quirked a lip at her flat words.

“Really?” he asked, much as she had.

“No. But I’ll survive” she said, a smile slowly blossoming across her lips.

They crept inside silently, slipping shoes off at the door, and padding bare foot along the moonlit
tiles. Rey stopped outside her door, and turned to Ben. Her heart had started to pound, a deep and dragging ache filling her chest at the prospect of saying goodbye.

“This is me” she breathed, as he stopped before her, just a shade too close, and stared down with an intensity that haunted her dreams.

“I know. It was always my room” he said, and she smiled a little, thinking of how Luke had given her a choice of rooms and there was something about this one that had called to her.

“Figures” she breathed as he moved closer still, and his very proximity filled her body with a deep satisfying feeling, as though a part had been lost and just found. His hands moved to cup her elbows, and his thumbs ran over her skin, as she gently placed her palms on his chest.

“I don’t know how to say goodbye” Rey whispered, asking her truest friend to help her. She had come a long way, since the woman who would sacrifice her own life and hopes and dreams to heal Ben, and to be there for him, even if it meant spiralling into darkness together. She had a life, her own one, and an ambition, more than she had ever hoped for herself. And yet, being here, so close, she couldn’t deny that he was still her hearts desire.

“Let’s not then. Let’s say… until next time…” Ben murmured.

“There will be a next time?” Rey blurted, desperate to comfort the insecurities inside.

“Rey, between you and I… there will always be a next time. I will say it to you, even on my deathbed, and wait for you in the inbetween for that next time” he said. Rey absorbed his words, her heart clenching around them, tucking them inside for safe keeping.

“Hey, not fair…” she protested mildly. Ben reached inside his jacket pocket, and drew out an envelope.

“Here, I forgot to give this to you” he said, breaking the spell his heart-breaking words had cast.

She opened it eagerly, and looked down at a homemade card. The cartoon on the front bore the girls from her self-defence class, all dressed in super hero garb, and standing victorious over Ben, who was lying on the floor, alongside Mikey. Rey felt tears spring to her eyes as she looked at it. Inside were messages from them all, and she read and reread each one.

“I promised I would make sure your class was taken care of” Ben said after a long pause, where Rey just stared at the card, and the reminder of a life she dearly missed in New York.

“Are they all –“

“All original attendees are still there, and it’s grown quite a bit. We are setting them up in different neighbourhoods, using local martial arts gyms to provide the coaching, and mentoring. The mentorship programme is going strong and achieving quite a bit, that’s Hux’s baby, believe it or not. His first achievement was an emancipation”

“Layla?” Rey asked. Ben nodded. Rey smiled wildly up at him, and he grinned back. It was a shared joy of doing something real, helping those kids, changing their lives, like they had changed each others, when they were both lost children.

“Mikey is coordinating between the different programmes. It’s a sort of an apprenticeship, but he’s making it his own. It really suits him. He’s decided not to bother with college, and has committed to it full on. He’s the foundation’s youngest employee.” Ben said.
“This is all – it’s a lot and its wonderful” Rey said, feeling as though she might yet again cry in front of Ben.

“Have you considered what you’ll be doing, when… if… you return to New York?” he asked next, and the stilled tone of his question made her look back up at him.

“I don’t know, honestly, I have no idea” Rey confessed.

“Well, you could do anything, or go anywhere you wanted, just please consider the foundation, the structure to institute the Art Therapy programme Luke has developed is finally falling into place, all over the city. You could reach a lot of students, inspire them, support them”

“And work alongside you?” Rey asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I mean, not at the same desk or anything, but I suppose our paths might cross, in the office, now and then” he said, awkwardly searching for words.

“Hmmm, co-workers. I’m not sure that’s where I imagined our story ending up” she said, half teasingly, half seriously.

Ben suddenly raised his hands to cup her cheeks, and tilted her head up to face him, leaning in and gently brushing his lips over her forehead, sending every part of her body into nerve tingling, breathless anticipation. His lips brushed a soft kiss there, and then words, so faint she could barely make them out.

“Who says it’s the end?”

And then, he was stepping back, pulling himself bodily away with great effort.

“Goodnight Rey, until next time” he said, and turned, striding off down the corridor, with the air of a man who had to leave right then, or lose the ability to do so.

After a restless, hot and flushed night, where Rey tangled her sheets, thought of Ben down the hall and his words, again and again, she finally rose, and got dressed. The morning outside her window was quiet, and she opened the door to the hall, and saw a rectangle of paper fall from its prop onto the floor. She picked it up, her hand shaking as she saw herself, rendered in charcoal, stunning detail and heart-breaking beauty. She wasn’t a vain person, she accepted her appearance. She knew when she looked nice, and knew when she could look better. She didn’t look like the woman in the picture, not to anyone except one person. It was the view of her, through the eyes of a person who loved her. It was her, in Ben’s eyes.

“Rey?” she heard Luke’s voice drifting to her from the open window. Holding the sketch closely, she went to the window and looked down.

“Fancy that trip to Florence today? I could come along, I feel like getting out” he called. She smiled down at her other surrogate father, probably worried she’d spent the whole day moping around the villa.
“Sure, I just need to get dressed.” she called.

“Ben’s gone, left early” Luke offered, as though it were some sin he must confess, his lined face crumpled in concern as he looked up at her. She nodded a reply.

“I know. It’s alright. I’ll be down in 5” she called back, and as she stepped toward her wardrobe to get dressed, she realised it was alright. She was alright.

It was the most peaceful she could remember feeling.
The years apart - final part

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So far away, but still so near
The lights go on, the music dies
But you don't see me standing here
I just came to say goodbye

Robyn – Dancing on my own

The day after they got back from Florence, Rey went about her usual routine. Mediating with Luke, cleaning the villa and reading some articles. Then, as she stared out the window at the hazy countryside, she felt a buzzing, restless type of energy that longed to be set free.

She went to her room, and put on that old bikini she had been wearing when Ben had arrived, and then went to the studio.

She painstakingly laid out cloths to cover the floors and surfaces, even the lower portions of the walls. Then she poured paints, which ever ones she fancied, without too much thought, into large buckets.

She looked at the large canvases that were spread along the walls, and dipped her hands in the colours, music pounding around her, her chest heaving with anticipation.

She approached the closest one, and trailed her hand across it, a large, vivid swipe of yellow marring the white paper, and bringing it to life at the same time. With her other hand, a long, sweeping trail of purple/black joined the yellow, the dark and the light, warring for dominance on the canvas.

She painted with her whole body, twisting and stretching, sometimes almost throwing herself against into the entire motion. It was like surrendering to a storm that was coming from inside her. She might have cried at some point, she surely laughed at others. She put her emotions on the paper, a tangled and sorry history of sadness and loneliness, fear of abandonment and scars of childhood neglect.

Hours passed, as she rested and got back up and kept going.

She thought of Ben, and Jack. She thought of her mother and the father she’d never known. She thought of all those points in her life where time had spun out into choices and consequences, diverging madly from each other, carrying her down different paths.

She wasn’t sure exactly when she stopped, her arms and body a bruised looking mix of colours, and she felt Luke’s hand on her shoulder, slumped as she was on the floor in the middle of the room. She looked up at him, her face still raw and open, all the emotion that had been flowing out of her still so very present. He looked down at her with affection.

“It’s beautiful, Rey. Is it done?” he asked, and she nodded. It was done. Confronting all that was
lurking inside her all that the business with Ben had stirred up, it was done. Month of tiny steps, and finally falling free into the She looked back at the mad canvas, and laughed.

“It is not beautiful” she said, standing with his help.

“It’s you – it’s beautiful” Luke said patiently, as she rubbed hand arms.

“You go and shower, I’ll tidy up” he said.

Hours later, after filling the cavern of her stomach with pasta and wine, Rey wondered back to the studio, and looked inside. Everything was clean and calming.

She stepped in, and sat down in front of an easel. There was a canvas there, with a note clipped to the top.

*And now, show me what you can really do*

Ben

She would never say where she came from
Yesterday don’t matter if it’s gone
While the sun is bright
Or in the darkest night
No one knows
She comes and goes

Ruby Tuesday - Rolling Stones.

“Ben, we need to talk” Astoka said, as she sank elegantly onto the sofa of the coffee shop they’d met in.

Outside was bitingly cold and frosty, with the first few flakes of snow starting to drift down in spiralling flurries from above. He pushed her lavender earl grey over to her, and waited expectantly. When she had been late, he had half expected her not to show. She had been pulling back from him lately, a slow but creeping thing, and he could hardly blame her. He wasn’t her boyfriend, had never been her lover, and as a newly minted friend, found himself coming up against the barriers of his capabilities constantly. As such, he did what he could to prove himself useful in some capacity. Took her to the opera, and any shows she wanted, expensive dinners and gifts. He had done all those things, until she’d put a stop to it all, in a shadow filled night, not long after he’d returned from Italy.
The hallway outside Astoka’s apartment was dimly lit, and as they moved along, he stiffened when he felt her hand suddenly slip into his, and she looked up at him, as beautiful as always, and smiled. He smiled tentatively back, unsure of where she was headed, when they reached her door, and she opened it with one hand, the other still entwined in his.

“Come in for a drink?” she asked sweetly.

“I shouldn’t, I have that flight to L.A, early on.” He reminded her, and moved to step back, but her hand stopped him, still clasped in his. He looked down in askance.

“Ben… I know what you said. But I can’t not try… please, just let me try?” she breathed, and moved forward, gently pressing her lips to his. He froze, his mind bombarded with thoughts, and curiously empty at the same time. As she moved to deepen the kiss, he remained still, even as her hands rose to his chest and moved slowly down.

It felt good, being touched by someone that he cared about. And he did care about Astoka, deeply. He worried about her problems at work, and he shared in her triumphs, he cared if she was happy, and tried to change her mood when she was sad. He cherished the moments of her life he got to share. And to be touched by someone he cared about, who cared about him, who wanted him, even knowing what she did about him, it felt good. But, it also felt selfish.

“I can’t” he breathed against her forehead, pulling away. Her hands instantly dropped, as did her expression, though she didn’t look surprised, more resigned.

“I still can’t” he said, and she nodded.

“I’m sorry, I never meant to lead you on-“

“You didn’t. You were honest with me, I just thought maybe, in time... “ she laughed at herself a little bitterly, and blinked up at him.

“I made the mistake of thinking I could understand your heart more than you do... I’m sorry”

“Don’t apologise to me, ever. The time you have given me, the… companionship, its more than I’ve ever had. It’s meant the world to me”

“And I ruined it” she muttered, clearly angry at herself.

“You didn’t ruin it, you couldn’t ruin anything. You’re amazing. You’re my best friend” he said honestly. He waited there in silence, for her to deliver his sentencing.

“I knew it all going in, and I honestly thought we could just be friends, that’s what I meant to be… but, somewhere along the line, I started to need more. I need more Ben.” She admitted.

“I want someone to build a life with, start a family with. I want all that” she said.

“I want you to have it, you deserve to have whatever you want” he said. It was unspoken between them, that he couldn’t be the one to give it to her.

“That woman you spoke about, the one you told me had the best part of you. It is worth being apart like this? Is she worth all this… loneliness?”

“Yes” he replied instantly, and his confident expression, his unfleeting sureness made Astoka nod
gently as she looked at him.

“Why don’t you tell her that? Why be alone?” Ben remembered Rey’s long ago words, how he hadn’t understood them then, but he did now.

“I may be alone, but I’m not lonely, and I think it’s ok, to be alone sometimes. I have never really been before. I was lonely, for a long time, but I was never alone, and I think it was my biggest problem” he thought of Snoke, and all the time he had hovered in his life, his long shadow cast over even times when he wasn’t there, and his voice, judging and loving, whispering in his thoughts.

“And she - she has so much light inside, so much to give, such thirst to learn, such passion just to live. I don’t want her to be with me, because I can’t be without her. I don’t want loving me to mean sacrificing herself. I want her to choose to be with me.” He said roughly. Astoka stared up at him, her face softening into a smile.

“I can’t wait to meet this girl”

“Who says you will?” he asked lightly, relieved their conversation was turning from the soul searing honestly that still made him so uncomfortable.

“Of course, I will. Because we are friends, Ben Solo, and I plan on being there… when she inevitably chooses you”

He watched her fidgeting with her bracelet, awkward, gathering courage.

“You’ve met someone” he said gently, and she looked surprised for a moment, before giving him a sheepish smile. He returned it, with a broad smile of his own, one he found he felt, deeply in his heart, without reservation.

"It's serious?"

"We're getting married" she said, stunning Ben for a long moment.

"Well, that is certainly serious” he said, gesturing behind her to the bar man, and ordering champagne. Ashoka’s face was flushed and radiant as she accepted a glass of fizzy bubbles, and Ben raised his to hers.

"Congratulations, I couldn't be more happy for you.. though, I will have to meet him first, check him out” Ben said, enjoying the laughter dancing in his friends eyes.

"Oh, I want you to do one better than that" she said, a secretive grin playing around her full lips. Ben raised an eyebrow at her.

"I want you to give me away"
Rey

Now it's time I get to going
Now it's time I get to find my own way
And I'll leave you lonely
I'll leave you lonely

Yellow Eyes - Rayland Baxter

Summer was coming to a close when Rey found herself sweeping the old tile floor of the villa, out into a dusky twilight, her mind engrossed in her pieces inside. Since the dam inside her had broken, she had painted almost without break for a week, and then, after a rest, had started a gruelling schedule, of working, painting and studying.

She had barely surfaced except the odd dinner with Luke, or a quiet lunch with Cassian. They hadn’t been intimate again, in the months since Ben had visited, and Rey couldn't really imagine their relationship becoming that way again. She worried about him a little, in his simple little house on the hill above the villa, writing and dreaming and missing the woman he had spoken off with such love in his eyes.

What it would be like, to be loved like that, she thought wistfully, and then, some small part of her knew she was, by Ben.

That evening, as though her thoughts had conjured Cassian’s mystery woman, she was just about to close the French doors and shut out the infernal mosquitos that were struggling to survive the late summer, when a light crunching on the driveway caught her attention.

The woman stood there, slight and dark haired. She shifted on the gravel, giving Rey a tentative smile. She didn’t seem shy, but quietly confident, dressed simply in a black linen shift dress, her dark hair loose over her shoulders.

“I’m sorry to bother you, I was hoping you could point me in the right direction. I am looking for someone who lives locally… a writer. Cassian Andor” the woman said, and as Rey looked at her, she suddenly knew in her heart who she was.

“Cassian doesn’t live too far off… I can show you, if you’d like. I’m Rey” she said, propping the broom against the door, and stepping forward with her hand outstretched.

“Jyn, and that would be lovely, if it’s not too much trouble.” Jyn said, her polished English accent highlighting each word. She smiled at Rey, and they fell into step together.

“How do you know Cassian? If you don’t mind me asking” Rey said, more to break the tension than anything else.

“He’s an old family friend. We used to be close, though, I confess, I haven’t seen him in a number of years”

“Does he know you’re coming?” Jyn shook her head.
“What a nice surprise” Rey said, and saw a flicker of nerves shoot over the woman’s delicate features.

“I hope it is” she said, with a nervous smile.

“So, you’re from England?” Rey observed as they started up the hill, a winding path through rocks and weeds.

“Yes, I grew up there, but have recently been living in the U.S. My husband was American” she said, and caught Rey’s curious glance at the use of the past tense.

“I’m divorced… very recently divorced” she said, and Rey nodded, her heart swelling a little for Cassian.

“I’m sorry to hear that” Rey said, at a loss as to how to respond. Jyn shot her a small smile.

“Don’t be” she said shortly, as they crested the last rise and Cassian’s cabin came into view.

“Here we are” Rey said, stopping at the end of the path, watching as Jyn stopped beside her.

“Will you – shall we go and knock?” she asked, and Rey shook her head slightly.

“This is as far as I go.” She said, stepping back, even as she could see the wooden door of the rustic cabin opening. Jyn’s eyes were glued to that movement, a pulse beating clearly in her slender neck.

“I’m not the one he’s waiting for” Rey said, and turned away, wishing to give them space and privacy. The sheer feeling she had seen in the woman’s eyes laid to rest any wonder that Cassian’s grand emotion toward her was unreciprocated.

There was no sound from behind her, as she quickly descended the rocky path, a strange, pressing feeling blossomed behind her eyes, and in her heart. She was happy for them, and she envied them. She walked slowly back to the villa, wrapping her arms around her midsection, hugging her lonely body the only way she had.

Later, as she sat in front of the easel and stared at the latest piece she was finishing, happy with the result, elated by the joy of creation once more, her sanctuary and escape restored, her phone beeped beside her.

She pulled it out, and pulled up an ongoing conversation and skimmed the new message.

*Well, Nessuno, it’s now or never. Do I have a personal Italian tour guide or not?*

He had been her constant companion, in text and email, even by phone, as strange as it was to get used to long, international calls. What had happened between all of them had changed him for the better. He was more introspective, less brash, his charm, once searing with the heat of the sun, mellowed to a calm and pleasant warmth. That lingering curiosity she had always had, their chemistry always undeniable, their timing never quite right.

She bit her lip, and thought again of Jyn and Cassian. They had loved each other and been parted, and had continued on. Maybe they would be together now, maybe not. Life was tricky and twisty and unpredictable. Most of all, it was short, and there was so much to see and feel. She had loved Ben with the entirety of her heart, but she loved her friends and Jack too. The heart was ever expanding and infinite, and she realised, somewhere over the years since she had had to pick the broken, scattered pieces of herself up off the floor of an apartment in the Upper West Side, that she
was ready. Ready to open herself up again, ready to try, ready to feel again. Ready to understand someone new.

She was finished waiting.

She had to live, and live now.

*Ok Dameron, you’ve twisted my arm. I’m yours.*

---

**Ben**

*Maybe I'm in the black, maybe I'm on my knees*  
*Maybe I'm in the gap between the two trapezes*  
*But my heart is beating and my pulses start*  
*Cathedrals in my heart*

Every tear is a waterfall - *Coldplay*

“Ben Solo, you do clean up well” Maz chuckled, as she wrapped a wrinkled and bejewelled hand around his arm and tugged him close for a hug. He gave it freely, stooping down the reach the diminutive little woman. She leaned away, and gave him a warm smile.

“Barely even a flinch, that’s what they call improvement” she said approvingly, and Ben couldn’t help the smile that sprang to his lips. It was true, he hardly noticed anymore, the casual physicality between normal people, friends and even acquaintances. Such a simple thing, that he had been excluded from before, the ability to receive touch without fear.

“Well, if it is, it’s thanks to you” he said, and she squeezed his arm.

“You know just what to say to me, Solo, and I like it” she laughed, before turning and looking around the church they were standing in.

“Have you met the groom?”

“Yes, we’ve had dinner a few times. I like him, I like him for her… though I doubt anyone deserves her, he comes close” Ben said, following Maz’s gaze to the alter at the front, nerves flickering through him as he realised that time was quickly disappearing between the ceremony and the time he had to make his speech. Ashoka’s father wasn’t in her life anymore, and her asking him to fill that role had moved him to the core. This was a relationship he had built, from the ashes of his broken and lonely soul, fresh and new. It was all new Ben, without the taint of the old, and he had tried his best to matter to someone, support someone, be present in their lives. His friendship with Ashoka was the result.

“I was speaking to your uncle the other day” Man said suddenly.

“Really? I didn’t know you two were on chatting terms”
“Goodness, yes. We were all friends once upon a time, before he headed off to hide in Italy and become a crabby old hermit. I asked him about using the institute to do some new therapeutic retreats” she said, giving Ben such a knowing sidelong glance, that he was sure he could predict what was coming.

“He said he’d have to clear it with the new owner… “ Maz said, and Ben remained motionless, waiting for her judgement.

“Ben…”

“Maz…” she tutted as she looked at him, her compassionate eyes soft.

“You don’t need to do things like that, to gain love and acceptance from someone…”

“I’m not, she doesn’t even know.”

“Then, why do it?”

“Because… she’s my family, one of the only ones I have left. We grew up together, she gave me the little light and hope I had when I was in my darkest times. She saved my life, I realise that now. Even when we were apart, knowing she was out there, that somewhere, she existed… it was hope, a spark, an ember. I gave her the institute because I want her to always have a home, and always feel safe. She hasn’t had enough of that in her life. I want her to have a place just for her, and I love her, and I can do it for her.. and she’ll be a good guardian for a good place, so why not?”

“You don’t worry she’ll find it controlling, manipulative?” he shook his head immediately.

“No”

“You sound sure”

“I am” he said with certainty and Maz raised an eyebrow at him.

“She won’t because… we are passed all that. She knows my heart. She is my heart” he said. Maz watched him a while longer, and before patting his hand gently.

“Sweet boy. I wish you all the very best things, and everything your heart desires” she said in a murmur. She cleared her throat and gave him a bright smile.

“Still planning on throwing yourself up the Himalayans?”

“Leaving in a week. Spiti to Ladakh” Ben confirmed, and laughed Maz’s shudder.

“Isolation, cold, hard terrain… it sounds awful. What was it Kipling said of Himachal Pradesh?”

“Surely the gods live here; this is no place for men” Ben supplied with a smile.

“I don’t know what you have to smile about… come and see an old lady to her seat” his doctor, and now, friend, muttered as she headed toward the front, muttering about altitude sickness, frost bite and the ridiculous need for men to conquer things.

Chapter End Notes
That's right, we are finally finished the years apart... one last time jump and bang - the last part (which till take place in a much more condensed timeframe)

Ok.... there's some soppy stuff in here... but bare with me, I'm getting sentimental in my old age.

This story is going to wrap up pretty soon, hopefully, and the end will continue the original plan for the story that was always there. If that's not your thing, don't subject yourself to it!

For those sticking it out till the end, let me know what you think! Predictions... hopes... dreams! It can all happen!

Thanks again to all the readers who have commented and messaged, it means the world that you take time out your day to make someone else smile)) For all your patience and grace under adverse circumstances in this fic... the end part is all for you))
It's a nice day for a white wedding... it's a nice day to start again

Chapter Notes

Title: White wedding - Bill Idol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2 years later

SAVE THE DATE

Catherine Phasma & Armitage Hux

ARE GETTING MARRIED

1st November
Vermont

invitation to follow
Rey let her bag fall from her shoulder as she kicked the door of her new apartment, bought, not rented, thank you very much, and fingered through her mail. Bills and coupons, an invitation to speak at a women in the arts luncheon that she put on the table.

The last envelop was thick, with her name and address lettering in gold calligraphy on the front. She stepped out her heels, and slipped her trench off, leaving her in her fitted charcoal dress and stocking feet. She ripped open the envelop already sure what she was going to find. She was approaching the age where every year brought more and more of the same kind of invitation through her letterbox, and she was pretty sure she could recognised them a mile away by now.

Her eye snagged on a leather satchel, Poe's, well worn and broken in, where it hung from the back of the door in the kitchen. He'd grab it in the morning before heading out, after pressing a kiss to her forehead, and she would bid him goodbye, eager to get on and start her own day. The thrill of her work, the sense of achieving something, making a difference, was like a drug she had become addicted to. She was making herself a name in the field, becoming an authority on art therapy, and being there, on the front lines getting it into communities where it would make the highest impact. Her newest promotion, higher up in the mental health department of the city was a great accolade, but after a long day like today, where she had been desk bound, pushing different papers around, and desperately far from the street level action, she questioned if it was what she really wanted.

She didn't want to sit back and be shielded by a shiny glass office and a PA. She didn't want to forget the kids who had inspired her to do the work she used every spare moment to do. It was her life, her baby, her love and her calling. It was her purpose, and that was something that some of the people in her life hadn't been able to accept.

She'd tried to explain to Poe, when he would become upset at her ongoing busyness, her constant preoccupation with the work, that it wasn't about him. It was about her, discovering her own potential, and revelling in it. Becoming a profession who others respected and consulted, becoming skilled at something. It was the way the work itself called to her like nothing and no-one ever really had.

Well, almost no-one.

And that was the crux of it, the unseen spectre that loomed over their ordinary and wonderfully normal, down to earth relationship. That some loves were greater than others.

That some loves, couldn't be ignored.

She ripped open the top and scanned the contents. Her stomach rose and dropped at the names inside, even while nerves and excitement rose up in her belly.

She'd known it was coming for a while, known she'd have a role in it even, but hadn't really stopped to consider what it meant. With the promotion and Poe moving out, Jack spending more and more time helping Luke out at the villa. After his all clear, he had visited her in Italy, and then, just stayed. It suited him, the quiet, the food and the weather. Doing odd jobs around the place was exactly the kind of work Jack loved, and under his gentle ministrations, the whole place was in
better shape than ever. Luke continued on, running his Institute and getting a steady, if small stream of students through the doors. She would visit soon, she promised herself, if this damn wedding didn't take up all her allocated holiday this year.

She'd have to go up to the wedding venue for a week, she thought anxiously, already planning how to minimise the disruption to her work.

She wouldn't be able to get away with less, and anyway, it had been so long since she'd seen them all, together in one place. The years of pizza and beer in her old apartment, Finn rubbing Rose's shoulders as they watched a movie, Poe texting on his phone, but keeping a running critical commentary at the same time, Catherine watching them all with her usual aloof affection, Jessica in the kitchen, mixing some undrinkable cocktail for the girls that they would pour in plant pots and down the toilet to avoid drinking.

So many people she thought of everyday... and one she tried not to think about at all.

Ben.

There was no doubt he'd be there, he was just as involved as she was. She tried to remember the last time they'd spoken, really spoken, just the two of them, and couldn't remember any time past his visit to Italy. It hadn't felt right, to continue contact with him, while dating Poe. She had told herself that if he was to initiate the contact, then she could respond, but to seek him out herself felt disloyal to her boyfriend. Deciding that rule, she had moved back from Italy, gone to job interviews and waited, but there was nothing. He didn't reach out to her, and so, in time, the thinking of him had quieted down inside her, and she had made her peace with the fact that it seemed they were not going to be in each others lives.

She'd almost seen him, a few months ago, in her office, when the Organa-Solo foundation had been called in to consult on an initiative the city was launching. She was supposed to be in the meeting, but had been called out to an emergency mere hours before.

She still didn't know if she was more disappointed or relieved, which seemed to be a constant state, if she allowed herself to think about Ben. She knew off him, of course. New York society darling, even more desired for his aloofness and refusal to appear or participate in society itself more than strictly necessary. The foundation had gone from strength to strength under his leadership, and she could see in his eyes, in a candid photo of him on the gossip pages, that he was happy. It wasn't quite the complete happiness of teenage Ben, despite all the things he had been dealing with, but it was an adult happiness. She ignored the women on his arm in the photos, rather hypocritically, as she stared absorbed by this sudden window into the life of the very person she tried so very hard not to think about everyday.

She looked down again at the invite and took a deep breath, annoyed at the shuddery quality that shook her chest. She could do this, she told herself sternly. She had given a presentation to a group of the most influential women in New York last month at a female empowerment brunch. She could see her childhood sweetheart, if that was at all applicable to Ben, and not fall apart.

Sure she could, she said again, willing herself to believe it.

Ben
"This came for you" Margot said, dropping the creamy envelop onto the desk in front of him, as he put away the documents they had been discussing. He glanced at his watch, noting that he'd have to leave soon to make his dinner reservation. He dropped it into his briefcase and stood, pulling on his coat, swiftly left the building, getting into his car, and instructing his driver toward the restaurant.

Alone in the back of the car, he pulled the envelop out and stared at it. He was getting old, he thought darkly, as he watched his merger collection of friends disappear one by one. He didn't blame them, more envied them. He ripped open the envelop and stared at the contents.

Well, he thought numbly, there really was someone for everyone. When Hux had first told him about his engagement, Ben had thought it was a joke. Now, seeing it in writing, bold as brass and going out to all their acquaintances, Ben wondered how Hux had managed it. To heal so completely as to be able to catch a woman like Catherine, someone who had seen him at his worst. He was happy for both of them, and envious and in all truth, nervous. There would be no way for Rey to avoid seeing him at the wedding, he knew she was part of the bridal party. When Hux had told him this, there had been a quality to his gaze that Ben hadn't understood.

He hoped Rey wasn't worried about seeing him, the very thought made him squirm. He didn't want to cause her undue stress, but at the same time, he couldn't wait to see her, even with Poe by her side. What he had told Maz was still true, to know she was happy was enough for him, but sometimes, he just needed to see her face again, her smile, her eyes. To update the treasured photo in his head, the one he poured over in his lonely moments and celebrated his triumphs with.

His heart pounded as he looked at the invite, a feeling of heady anticipation he hadn't felt in years. He had had relationships, some of them even lasting 6 months at a time. The demands of the body had eventually won out over the wasted wreckage of his heart. And yet, despite a procession of sweet girls, smart, beautiful and cultured, he remain mostly unmoved. Maybe a heart so abused could lose its sensitivity, he wondered sometimes. Maybe it no longer possessed the capacity to feel like it used to, so strongly and deeply. At any rate, his single status didn't bother him much. He had work to do, and people to help and a family legacy to live up to. There really wasn't time for much else, he reminded himself, before reaching for the papers in his briefcase and throwing the invite back inside.

Chapter End Notes

you guys... we are back! ready to delve into the final part? Rey and Ben - separated for
a couple of years at this point... both having had normal relationships in that time, and still finding themselves alone... suddenly reunited for a week at a remote location, surrounded by old friends and memories... who knows what could happen?

The beginning of the last part of this incredibly loooooong story - Part 5 - "What happened at Hux and Catherine's wedding" otherwise known as.... "How I remet your mother"

Enjoy xx
“Let’s go already!” Finn called out, his voice drifting on the swift autumn breeze to her sitting room window, as Rey checked her bag a second and third time.

There was such a staggering array of clothes she might possibly need for this week long trip down memory lane, she was certain she’d forgotten something.

Stifling a yawn, her jet lag weighting heavily on her, she finally zipped her case shut and wheeled it toward the door. She’d only just gotten back from visiting Jack and Luke in Italy, and the time difference was starting to bite. She had tried her best not to think too much about the wedding and the people who would be there, and yet, despite her best efforts, found her thoughts relentlessly turning in that direction.

She pulled her heavy coat on over her skinny jeans and boots, and wrapped an enormous scarf around her neck, burying her face in layers of cream wool.

The street outside was awash with the bright, soft colours of an early fall morning, and leaves of golden brown swept merrily along in the wind.

Finn was leaning against the car by the curb, chatting to Poe, who was sitting in the front seat. Rose waved from the back, and Rey looked for Catherine, before seeing another car, black and sporty, stopped just behind them.

The shadowy shape of two figures in the front seat sent her pulse into overdrive. Catherine opened the back door and stepped out. Hux wound down the passenger seat window, and gave her a stiff nod, which she returned, before being embraced by her friend. The driver had remained a shadow, except for the slightest curl of chin length hair and stubbled jaw, but even at that, she knew who it was.

Her heart always knew, when Ben was nearby.

“They are going to go up separately, so we girls can catch up” Catherine said as they got into the back of the car.

“Hey!” Poe let out a token protest, glancing over his shoulder at them. Rey gave him a nod, hoping it wouldn’t be too awkward. Funnily, out of the people she was nervous to see, her very recent ex-boyfriend wasn’t the one that occupied her thoughts near constantly.

“We are token girls, for the car journey at least…” Finn said, pulling them out into the quiet traffic of the morning.

“Realistically… probably the whole wedding…” Rose said, and Rey let that warm wash of old, comfortable friendships fill her up, reaching into all the little places where it had begun to ebb, and recharge them.
This was going to be great. Rey told herself again, her eyes closing in on the black car as it wove through traffic in front of them. Before she knew it, the picture was blurring, and sleep was dragging her under.

A soft rapping pulled her from a dream where she had been about to take a bite of an enormous birthday cake, strange as it was, and she became slowly aware of cool glass against her cheek, wetness on her chin, and her mouth being dry and open. Light pierced through her sleepy haze as she blinked her eyes open and closed and pulled her face from the window, where it seemed to have suckered on, with a charming combination of pressure and spit.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to orientate herself. The car had stopped, and she was alone inside. The soft rapping came from the window again, and she looked out to see the very man her thoughts had been shying away from for the past month.

Once again losing the chance to appear calm, cool and collected in front of Ben, he now stood outside, holding two coffees in paper cups, watching her through the glass. She made her brain work enough to lower the window, and squint up at him.

“Yes?” she attempted, which came out more like a grunt, and he wordlessly passed her the coffee cup. She sipped it gratefully. Milk no sugar, just like she liked it. She hummed gratefully, before looking back up at him.

Dressed casually in a leather jacket over a cable knit cream jumped, dark jeans, and his hair, just long enough to fall around his cheeks, it was like staring into the sun.

“It’s good… but good enough to have woken me up for? I haven’t decided” she said, and saw the slightly nervous look on his familiar, handsome features melt away, as a smile appeared on his generous mouth, and he leaned over the window, bracing an arm over the aperture to bring his face level with hers.

“Well, I might have something to help you decide…” he murmured, and pulled a little cellophane package out his pocket, handing it to her. Her eyes lit on the snack, and she grinned.

“Stroop waffle! Ok, fine. You win. Thank you.” She said, ripping off the packaging and dipping the sweet caramel treat into the steaming coffee. Ben watched her with amusement.

“You’re just going for it… straight in there” he observed, no doubt referencing the method the Dutch used to balance the waffle on top of the steam, and melt it slowly and evenly. Rey felt the sugar enter her bloodstream, and an instant jolt of energy follow it.

“Takes too long… you didn’t want some, did you?” she asked belatedly, taking a huge second bite and leaving only a little. Ben laughed at her discouraging expression.

“You’re really selling it to me, but no… you enjoy it” Rey nodded happily, and finished it off,
sucking the crusted sugar from her fingertips afterward and taking a long drink of coffee to wash the overly sweet residue from her tongue.

“Better?” Ben asked, as she seemed to collect herself.

“Better. Did you really wake me up just to ply me with sugar?” she asked as she opened the door, and climbed stiffly out. She rolled her shoulders to bring the blood back in, and tucked up her hair, swept back in her old three bun hairstyle. She crossed her arms and looked at Ben properly, as he sipped his coffee and stared right back.

“I know they aren’t planning on stopping again. I thought you’d like to use the… facilities before we left” Rey burst out laughing at his awkward expression.

“You thought I would need a pee break on the way…” she clarified, and he nodded, relaxing back against the car. It was true, Rey always needed to go to the toilet just when they had left a place, that it had got to be a running joke between them. But under that, there was something sweet there. Ben remembered, Ben thought about her. She tried not to read too much into that, even though it was hard to keep the smile of her face.

“You spend way too long thinking about my bodily functions, Solo. What’s the other reason?” she teased, seeing in his eyes that he was holding something back. He ducked his head a little shyly, before looking back at her and meaning her gaze.

“I couldn’t wait to see you” he simply, and the leap she had been trying to keep her heart from making finally failed and it just about flopped over in front of them. She was pretty sure if Finn was to see them now, he would say they were making heart eyes, but Rey didn’t care. Because Ben was here, and unchanged, and smiling. And it was everything she remembered it to be, and so much more.

“It’s been a long time” she agreed quietly, avoiding the unspoken questions in his eyes as he watched her.

“Too long” he murmured and she listened for an accusation there, but couldn’t find one.

“Well, now we have this wonderful week of organised fun to catch up over” she said, forcefully pushing away the sadness and regret that seemed to cloud over her heart when she thought of her distance from Ben.

“Indeed, I can’t wait” he said with a smirk, and she realised he was completely serious.

“Are you trying to tell me, Ben Solo, that you aren’t dreading this week long, activity filled, forced companionship debacle?” she demanded, wrapping her hands around her cup and inhaling the steam, watching as Catherine and Hux came out the gas station nearby and walked toward them.

“I’m not actually… strange that” Ben remarked. Rey shot him a wide eyes gaze, her eyebrows up at her hairline.

“Anyone you are dreading seeing?” he continued still, and she looked over at him, narrowing her eyes.

“Do you mean you?” she asked bluntly, watching him fold his long arms across his chest and give her a sheepish look.
“Maybe” he confirmed. She turned around and leaned her shoulder against the car, bringing her closer to him, close enough that no mistake could be made, and gave him her biggest smile.

“Never.” She said, and was sucked into the warmth in his eyes, like swimming in a pool of tropical water, calm and soft.

“Well, ditto” he said, and she snorted, smacking him on the arm and breaking the mood.

“Like I would ever be dumb enough to think you wouldn’t want to see me… me!… I’m a ray of sunshine” she said, as he pushed off the car, grinning at her as he made his way over to his little sports car.

“Sure, you are… drool and all” he called back, and Rey squashed down her indignant snort as Finn hurried her into the car.

“Hurry up, last car there is buying the drinks tonight.”

“And they are really fancy, I saw one with apricot brandy and maple syrup” Rose said excitedly.

“You saw one?”

“On the hotel website… “ Rose said and Rey was reminded once again of what incredibly organised females she was sitting beside, and wished it would rub off a little.

“Well, we definitely want to put that on their tab. Hotel bar, here we come”

Rey felt her worries melt away. She had been so anxious to see Ben, worried it would be awkward between them, worried it wouldn’t have felt like old times. But then, before they even arrived, Ben had solved all those doubts. Approaching her early on, establishing their old dynamic, revealing his own worries. It was masterful, and now, she could really relax, and look forward to the whole trip as a vacation, with friends, and someone she used to love. Well, two, if you counted Poe. That shouldn’t be that complicated.

The bar at the hotel was indeed fancy. Rey thought as she walked in with Catherine, admiring the sophisticated atmosphere, the low lights giving the place an intimate feel, and saw their friends already waiting for them. She had dragged her feet getting ready, the temptation of the bed calling to her, and it had taken a while to resist.

“Peanut, I gave Hux your order” Finn called, patting a seat of an plush emerald green couch for her.

“What is?” she asked, and smoothing her short black dress down a little.

“No clue, but it was the most expensive thing on the menu” Rose joined in, her eyes flashing merrily.

“I better like it or you’re buying me something with rum and fruit in it” Rey said, her eyes straying
to the bar, where Hux red hair and Ben’s towering height made them easily identifiable. Hux was
guesturing and talking animatedly, and Ben suddenly threw his head back and laughed. Rey stared
transfixed. He was leaning on the bar, looking completely relaxed, and smiling broadly at the man
before him. He slapped Hux on the back and they turned to the barman.

“He’s been here a while already” Finn muttered under his breath.

“Who? Ben?” Rey responded immediately, and Finn rolled his eyes at her.

“No, Poe, but good to know where your head is at”

“Hey, go easy, I’ve not seen the guy in years” she muttered, feeling her cheeks heat up under
Finn’s knowing gaze.

“So, what’s up with Poe?” she changed the subject, and thankfully Finn let her.

“He’s probably finding all this rough. You should speak to him” Finn said.

“He seemed fine in the car” Rey countered, the break up still so fresh she didn’t want to get into
some intimate, drunken conversation with him.

“Rey” Finn said flatly, refusing to drop her gaze until she turned her face away in defeat.

“Fine” she muttered, trying to muster enthusiasm. It was cruel not to check in, she knew that. But
she also knew their break up had been entirely mutual, and she wasn’t about to be painted as the
bad guy. Gone were the days of bending over backwards to please everyone, Rey prided herself on
that. It was selfish and it made her feel a little guilty, but she had made efforts to treat herself better,
expect more from people than ever before.

She felt eyes on her, and glanced away from Rose’s animated story to see Poe watching her. She
gave him a weak smile. Their break up wasn’t something she hadn’t really processed in a way, and
had been more than ready for in others.

When they had met in Italy, it had been warm and comfortable, and it was still there, that attraction.
The curiosity of what it would be like to be a girl who loved simply and wholly, without fear of
drama, sucked Rey into exploring that very thing with Poe, who had remained eager to be with her.
Maybe she had been flattered by his unflagging determination, perhaps even thought it romantic,
though now, with the benefit of a few years and hindsight, she could see it was about winning. Poe
liked to win, and he liked to be the good guy too, so when it became clear to both of them that they
weren’t destined to be together, it fell to Rey to end it, which was something she had put off for too
long.

Now, with Ben in the mix, a forever unspoken spectre hanging over the relationship, faced with the
flesh and blood man, enigmatic and charming, full of a confidence and ease she had never seen
before, Poe seemed to be shrinking before her eyes.

“To the victor, the spoils” Hux announced, empty handed as a waiter trailed him with the tray. The
drinks were dispersed and everyone sat. Ben was across the other side of the table from her, and
she tried not to focus too much over there.

Instead she sipped her drink, and wrinkled her nose.

“What? It’s no good?” Rose asked, as Rey passed her the cool glass.

“Not for me” she said, standing up, intending to go and order another cocktail. She hesitated,
needing Poe to move his knees before she could slip past.

“Where are you sneaking off to?” he slurred.

“The bar, you coming?” she asked, and brushed past. She walked to the bar, feeling eyes on her, one set in particular. Hazel coloured, though dark and warm in the dim light. She dropped her purse on the marble bar top and grabbed the cocktail menu. She felt Poe approach.

“You buying?” he asked, clumsily standing too close, his shoulder knocking hers so she had to steady herself.

“Sure” she said, keeping her face neutral and ordered him a water. He grunted as it as placed before him.

“Spoil sport” he said, but took a drink, and Rey felt a little tension leave her shoulders.

“You know, I never imagined we would be here alone” Poe said suddenly. Rey watched her cocktail being made with great interest.

“We aren’t alone”

“You know what I mean. Not together.” He said.

“You had already moved out when the invites came” she reminded him, as he sighed and rested his forehead on his hand.

“You mean you’d already asked me” he muttered, and Rey felt a surge of annoyance.

“Don’t do that” she snapped at him, before reaching for patience.

“Don’t rewrite the past. We were done, Poe, you know that. You told me you were relieved.” She said, and he nodded slowly.

“I was, I know, I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s up with me. Weddings, I guess. And the gang is all together, and then there’s Hux and…. Him” he glanced at Rey, taking in every detail of her innocent expression.

“Am I going to have to watch you two rediscover your love for each other?” he said glumly. Rey looked at him in surprise.

“No, of course not. We’ve both moved on… we broke up years ago. There’s nothing there, anymore”

“I can’t decide if you are saying that for my benefit, or you really believe it” Poe said, shaking his head as he finished his water.

“It’s the truth” Rey said quietly. Ben had left everything open for them, when she’d last seen him in Tuscany. Come back to New York, work at the foundation… And then, her and Poe had gotten together, and she had felt too guilty to go for a job that mean she was around Ben all day. She hadn’t even felt right keeping in contact with him. It would have felt like cheating. And so, she hadn’t, and he hadn’t and in time, enough time, she had stopped thinking of him everyday, and only once a week, and then, once a month, and then, only when she read some article that mentioned him or saw some art from a student that moved her, full of anger and despair. In those times, she thought of the boy she had known, his dark paintings so lost and alone, crying out for help in any way, before he had slipped away from her. In those moments, she thought of Ben Solo, and did
everything she could to help the student realise he wasn’t alone anymore.

Poe was watching her, she forced a smile to her lips, but it felt like a tremendous effort.

“You really don’t know, do you?” Poe said gently, as Rey took the tall, pink cloudy cocktail the barman laid out before her and paid. Poe seemed to consider something, and then, shook his head with a rueful smile.

“No, I’m not going to be a dick about all this, but I’m not a saint either.” He said, and leaned into Rey, surprising her, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Figure it out yourself, Nessuno” he smiled, and walked away back to the group.
Breakfast at the hotel was glorious. A bank of chefs, cooking up fresh omelettes, another stacking hot pancakes and Belgian waffles, and another, serving eggs any way you wanted, benedict, poached, with smoked salmon, asparagus tips and avocado. Rey couldn’t decide which to tackle first. Another table was laden with fresh fruit, yogurts and muesli, and the final one, the pinnacle of breakfast decadence, a mountain of pastries so varied and delicious looking, it was straight from a Parisian patisserie.

Catherine ran down a list of wedding things that needed doing, and it was so long, Rey longed to run and hide in her room. She had a vision of being locked in a room, surrounded by hundreds of centrepieces, between Ben and Poe, and had to down coffee to soothe her suddenly choked throat.

The group who were already there would be alone for a few days, with more and more guests arriving around day 4, and then, into full blown stag and hen parties and then the wedding.

Catherine was talking about her parents, and who was talking to who in her family, and the importance of making people stick to the seating chart.

“Rose, if you could step in a redirect anyone who isn’t in the right place. Rey, you can take a back seat on that” Catherine said as she popped a strawberry in her mouth.

“Not that I mind, but why is Rose more suited for moving along the rule breakers than I am?”

“She’s more diplomatic” Catherine said mildly. Rey raised her eyebrows at her, and then thought better of it.

“Fine by me” she reminded herself that she wanted less responsibility at the wedding, not more, and held her tongue.

“We have the spa day, while the boys are out shooting” Catherine said, and Rose gripped the table and shuddered.

“I’m so worried about Finn holding a gun, with Poe around, messing about, they’ll probably shoot each other”

“Of course, they won’t, there will be an instructor there.” Catherine said confidently, and Rose shook her head.

“If you think that’ll stop them…” she trailed off, and then seemed to brighten

“But a spa day sounds fun! Should we book some treatments?”

“That’s all taken care off, curtesy of Hux’s mother. It’s a little tradition in their family. She will
also be attending, so we will need to make her feel welcome.”

Rey tried to imagine what Hux’s mother might be like, and couldn’t. She just nodded along, before focusing on something Catherine had said.

“Taken care off? Like, we don’t get to choose what treatments we want?”

“Do you want to pay £500 dollars each?” Catherine countered, and Rey quashed an involuntary shriek at the amount. She rarely spent money on a professional haircut, never mind 500 bucks on massages and nail varnish.

“Fine, whatever. What about the Hen?” said Rey, raising her eyebrows at Catherine in a suggestive way.

“The Hen will be dinner and drinks, and then, a tasteful bar… Rose is in charge of the planning” Catherine said smiling briefly at them both, before answering a call on her mobile. As she strode away, Rose turned to Rey and gripped her wrist.

“Ouch! What?”

“I forgot to book a place to go for the Hen! I started calling around yesterday, but we are in the middle of nowhere and there isn’t much available for a large number… what should we do?”

“Just book wherever, and let’s get Catherine drunk enough she thinks it’s the place she wanted” Rey suggested. Rose rolled her eyes.

“That’s not helpful”

“I think it’s perfect” Rey said, before pulling out her phone and googling a few places.

“Look, this place looks great, and they already have women at hen parties in the photos”

“You think this is a place Catherine and Hux’s mother would like?” Rose said sceptically. Rey shrugged.

“Sure”

“They have a karaoke machine… and a bucking bronco”

“Sounds great to me” Rey said, shushing Rose as Catherine reappeared and threw herself down at the table.

“What a nightmare. The gourmet fudge place I ordered from can’t deliver in time, some problem with their kitchen… those were going in the place settings- those little silver boxes. Why is all this so hard… everything is a problem. Maybe it’s a sign or something” she said, and Rey stared at her friend, rattled by her loss of composure. She had never seen Catherine so unsure of herself. She exchanged a panicked look with Rose.

“Fudge?? That’s the easiest stuff in the world to make, what’s it made of… like sugar and butter? I’m sure the hotel would let us make it here”

“And you could do that? Handle making it?” Catherine asked, looking up and pinning a hopeful look on Rey. She found herself nodding.

“Of course, no problem” she had no idea if her face was reflecting her self-doubt, but figured it mustn’t be, as Catherine slumped back, relieved.
“Thank you, Rey, you’re a life saver. One less thing to worry about. We were going to have orange blossom and white chocolate, pistachio and fig, and walnut and cranberry types.”

“Right, erm, that sounds lovely… I should write that down somewhere” Rey said, looking in her bag for a piece of paper, already dreading what seemed like an impossible task.

“It has to set, right? So maybe do it tomorrow, and then it will be ready for putting in the boxes the next day” Catherine continued as Rey scribbled out her instructions.

“Ok, got it, so you see, place setting gifts, sorted. We can do this!” Rose said with an enthusiasm that didn’t even sound forced, and Rey marvelled at it, then again, Rose hadn’t just signed up for fudge duty.

The talk turned to their group, and when others would be arriving, including Jessika, who would be getting there later that day.

“So, what about you and Poe?” Rose suddenly asked Rey, jolting her from her careful planning of her 3rd trip to the buffet. She turned to look at Rose and Catherine, both waiting for her answer. She shrugged.

“It’s over, we’re just friends again”

“It’s not been that long”

“It was over before he moved out… for a while actually.”

“I knew things weren’t great, but, I didn’t expect both of you to be so… relieved… to be over” Catherine said carefully and Rey sighed.

“Have you ever been with someone that you cared about so much, that you loved, really… but over time, in the monotony of daily life and work… you realised you just weren’t excited to come home to anymore? That they had just become just your friend, and not someone you longed to see…” Rey trailed off, feeling like she was failing completely to explain the situation between them.

“It wasn’t just me, you know. It was Poe too. Late nights at work, going for drinks with the people at the office, parties I wasn’t invited to… and the most telling thing? I was relieved, and so was he. We stopped missing each other when we were apart. Sometimes, affection, companionship, that’s great, and it’s lasting, we will always have it… but love? Not that you two, with your committed relationships and marriage on the horizon would understand…” she teased to lighten the mood.

“Between two people, sometimes, it doesn’t last, just ebbs away, slowly, and one day, it’s gone” she finished, and gave a lopsided smile as the two girls looked at her sympathetically.

“But I’m not that sad… not like I was before –” she trailed off, unwilling to darken the mood further by mentioned those chaotic final days of her greatest, most heart-breaking relationship.

“I don’t feel lonely without Poe. I’m happy to be by myself, and have my work, and you guys, my family. I have a life now, I am a person now… it all feels different” she said. The girls nodded in understanding, then glanced at each other, and Catherine, taking a deep breath, seemed to brace herself.

“And Ben? Has the love gone?” she said, and Rey felt a whisper in her soul of an answer, one she would always give. Never

“That’s ancient history” she said evasively, colouring as she felt their eyes on her.
“What? Do I still care for Ben? Of course I do - he was – is - always, my… first love, first everything. But we haven’t spoken in so long, and he is so different. Good, different. He’s lighter, and laughs more and I’m just so happy for him.”

“You should tell him that” Rose said.

“I will.” Rey promised as she ran her finger around the rim of her cup again and again, memorising the smooth, curved edge.

“You’ve changed too” her friend continued.

“I know.”

“So… maybe you guys need to get to know each other again, the new versions of yourself” Catherine said practically.

“Maybe” Rey said, the suggestion hinting at the fear that lurked inside her, that was always there.

“But?”

“What if the person Ben is now… doesn’t need me anymore. What if in the ways we’ve changed, we’ve lost that parts of ourselves that fit together?” Rey said softly, a quiet confession of her greatest fear. Her friends stared at her mutely for a moment, before Rose picked her hand up and squeezed it.

“Ben only agreed to come early to the wedding to see you. Hux had to talk him into it, and the only thing that mattered is that you were here. I don’t think it has changed, for him anyway. I think he still misses you, everyday” Catherine said, and Rey felt like crying at the words. The way they made her heart soar, and fall simultaneously. To still be loved by Ben was everything, but they had lost so much time, in heartache and separation. And the other fear, deep inside. As the bitter wounds of their failed relationship had finally healed, who could say that they weren’t poison to each other, that such grand emotion wouldn’t once again leave them tossed about on stormy seas and broken by their feelings. Ben was doing so well, he was the man he had always meant to become, and what if she ruined it all.

“You need to find out, here, during this week. You’ll always regret it if you leave here uncertain” Rose said. Rey felt a surge of love for her two friends, always supporting her, always wanting the best for her.

“I love you two, you know that?”

“Course you do”
“Yep”

“I was kind of thinking of just hanging out by the pool, and maybe… going back to bed… I have to google how to make fugde” Rey said, fingering the skin-tight jodhpurs sceptically.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re here to have fun, and Catherine will be mad if you don’t come” Rose said, pushing Rey to start getting dressed.

20 minutes later, stuffed into some of the most uncomfortable clothes she had ever worn, she watched a groom leading a gleaming chestnut horse in her direction. The stable overlooked fields and woods with winding bridle paths and small, maintained trails leading off them.

They were all assembled, and in various stages of mounting horses and joking around. Hux was already atop a large white animal, and Ben was climbing confidently up on a black horse whose back was so far above Rey’s head, she was getting vertigo just looking up. It was still a jolt, seeing him.

It was the strangest sensation, to be around Ben again, but in a group of people constantly. There was a distance there, a sense of careful self-preservation. Of two people who used to know each other, and were testing the waters again.

Catherine was holding her hands up for silence, and eventually managed it, as she called out the task they were completing. The hotel had organised a scavenger hunt, on horse back, in multiple teams. Just the tip of the organised fun iceberg. Rey narrowed her eyes at her friend as she stared straight faced into the crowd of them, and listed the teams. She expected it before the words fell from Catherine’s mouth.

“Rey and Ben” Finn whistled loudly, adding to Rey’s glowing cheeks as she felt everyone look at her, Ben included. Rey wondered again if she could get away with hightailing it back to the room before anyone noticed, but she could already feel Ben’s presence, like a magnet, drawing her toward him.

The teams dispersed slowly, as Rey turned her attention back to the mounting block and the horse standing next to her, and tried to ignore her desperately jumping stomach, as she sensed Ben guiding his horse closer.

“Do you need a hand?” he asked, as she shook her head determinedly, and pulled herself up, thankful for her upper body strength, and settled uneasily in the saddle.

“What?” she demanded, as he watched her with a touch of amusement.

“Nothing, you have an interesting seat” he said, and turned the nose of his horse toward the stable yard gate.

“Well, I wasn’t like you, Catherine and Hux, riding about when I was a teenager at your fancy school”

“I seem to recall it being your school too” Ben corrected her, calling back to her over his shoulder, as she willed her horse to move. Thankfully, it seemed inclined to follow his, and soon they were moving slowly along.

“Don’t pull the reins, just tighten your thighs, direct her with your body’s movements” he said softly, as their horses came to walk alongside each other. She looked up at Ben, pushing her too large riding hat up so she could see him.
“This is weird” she said simply. There was something about being with Ben, that seemed to make all her extra education, experience talking to large groups at conferences and eloquence that her work gave her, simply vanish. She was once again a teenager scavenger. The strangest part was, she didn’t mind. There were no airs and graces, no pretences, and it was a relief.

“You’ll get used to it, but take a bath tonight, you’ll probably hurt tomorrow”

“That is not what I was talking about, but stop thinking about my nether regions please” she laughed as Ben reached out and pushed a branch out her path, the movement bringing him swinging closer to her for a moment.

“Ah, you mean this, between us. I don’t think it’s weird” He said finally, settling back on his saddle, and pulling the map from his belt and staring at the first marker clue.

“Really?”

“Really. How about you and Dameron. I saw you at the bar last night, it, it looked like a fairly awkward conversation” he said lightly, and she couldn’t help glancing over at him.

“It wasn’t.” she said, noting the smoothness of Ben’s expression.

“I thought maybe you were rekindling things” he continued, once again brushing stray golden branches from their path.

A leaden weight settled in her stomach. This was not the Ben she knew. The Ben who had roared and railed with tormented, jealous love for her. This Ben was either far better controlled, or not feeling the same emotions toward her. She had expected that, of course, but being faced with it was a bitter pill to swallow, even if she had participated in the creation of this very situation.

“No… not rekindling. We are over. For good” she stated firmly, and saw out the corner of her eye, the slightest curl of Ben’s generous mouth.

“Would it be rude of me to say… I’m glad?” he said, and Rey froze, even as her heart started to pound.

“I don’t know how to answer that” she blurted, when the silence became too stretched to last. Ben nodded a little.

“Ok, I’ll give it to you. It’s a little weird” he finally conceded.

“Yes! Thank you. I knew it wasn’t just me… it’s like… I don’t know. You’re Ben’s twin brother, and so much is the same, but some fundamental things are just different and I don’t quite know what to expect” she tried to explain, leaving out the part that the air felt thick with all the things she wasn’t saying, wasn’t asking. Did he still care about her? Was it too late? Would they even be good together? Could they even survive another go around? Was it all a terrible idea?

“Rey” she became aware that Ben had pulled her horse to a stop, and they were now sitting close, horses snorting in the crisp air, under the canopy of crimson and gold leaves of the trail, and he was focused on her with that intensity that she had missed and dreaded in equal measure.

“Yes” she said slowly, watching as one of his long arms slowly reached toward her, and his fingers tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, where it had escaped from her hat.

“Stop overthinking everything”
“I’m not!” she protested. He gave her a bemused smile.

“Don’t forget, I know you… I can see the wheels turning. I didn’t come here to make it awkward for you, or worry you. It was never my intention.” She stared up at him. He wasn’t pushing into her space, he wasn’t overwhelming her and pushing or challenging her. He was giving her room and she didn’t know quite what to do with it.

“You’re so different” she whispered softly, the admission making the energy between them charged. She saw a flash in his eyes, a dark remembrance of the past Ben she referenced. He nodded slowly.

“I am, I suppose, but not as much as you think. You’re different too, you know” he let his eyes trail over her, but she didn’t feel the look to be intrusive, simply noting the differences.

“I guess we don’t really know each other anymore” Rey said, surprised to find that the words made the back of her throat tight. Ben gave her a short smile.

“No. I know you Rey and you know me – you knew me, even when I didn’t know myself. It isn’t the fundamentals that have changed, it’s just the details” he said, and in true Ben style, broke her heart wide open with his searing and disarming honesty. She felt the tug of tears at the corners of her eyes, and looked away, scrubbing her hand across to disperse them.

“I swear I haven’t cried in years, and now, a day in your company, and here I go” she laughed it off, but saw a swift frown cross his brow.

“No – I don’t mean you upset me, you haven’t.” she said quickly, reaching out a hand to rest on his arm.

“I just mean…. I’ve missed you, Ben Solo.” She said finally, daring to look up into his face, which was tilted toward her, his eyes rapt on hers.

“Tell me you’ve missed me?” she almost whispered, a plea, a yearning that had been buried deep and determinedly ignored for so long, and now locked in that familiar gaze, the hazel gold of his eyes felt like coming home, she couldn’t stop it from spilling out.

“I’ve missed you” he replied instantly, and she had to repress the urge to reach her hands up and cup his broad, cheeks, tanned for once, and rub her fingers into his chocolate brown hair. She lost track of how long they sat like that, until Ben broke the silence, his voice quiet.

“Why didn’t you call? Even if you were with Dameron, just to keep in touch, I would have liked to speak to you. I kept waiting for you to call” he said, and she felt her heart break a little. She wondered if they would ever stop hurting each other.

“You could have called me” she said, though knew it for a sorry excuse.

“No. I couldn’t. It was your choice, Rey. It had to be your choice.” He said.

“Ok, I get that. I chose not to.” She said, and Ben’s open gaze shuttered a little, a hurt flickering there, before he made to pull back.

“No, listen. I had to choose not to everyday, sometimes more than once a day. I couldn’t, it wouldn’t have been right, while I was with Poe. It would have felt tainted… wrong, and I don’t want anything between us to feel like that.” She confessed, and saw that hurt in Ben’s eyes melt away. His eyes strayed over her, memorising her face, committing it to memory.
“Tell me something about you that no one else knows… I used to know everything, and now there’s so much space in between us” Rey said, and waited to see if Ben would. He thought for a moment, before nodding gently.

“I read to my mother, in those last days, like a did when I was a boy, with the roles reversed. We would sit and I would read Tolkien to her, and she would play with my hair. And we danced, to their song. I remember you telling me to dance with her, and I did.” He said quietly.

“Your turn” he said after a long pause where the ghost of Leia walked between them. Ok, Rey thought, steeling herself.

“I have had your number in my phone for the past few years, and every now and again, when things were really overwhelming or I was failing at something, or I just needed to feel comfort, or I just missed your voice, I would take it somewhere quiet, and hold it in my hand, ready to call. It would calm me down. And I’ve been doing it daily, since Poe moved out.”

Ben’s eyes seemed to ignite at her words, turning from golden hazel to molten gold, as his expression took on a new intensity.

“I know it’s silly. Who has the same number for so long? But it made me feel better”

“It’s the same number” Ben said, confirming something she had always thought herself ridiculous for believing.

“I wish you’d called it… all those times, every single one”

“I wouldn’t have known what to say, how to explain…”

“You didn’t have to explain anything. You could have just asked me what the weather was like where I was, and what I ate for lunch. We could just have talked about anything. Everything. Nothing. I wish you’d called” he said again, a sighing wistfulness to his tone.

Rey felt the words rise to her lips to explain, to try and answer his silent question – of why she hadn’t. The truth exposed her vulnerable heart too much. To speak to Ben was to want to see Ben, and to want to see Ben, was to forget everything else. Rey had worked hard to create the life she had now, and become a person she was proud to be. She could have normal relationships, she could be alone. She was afraid of losing herself again, of becoming a half person who was so consumed with passion and love that she let it burn her up from the inside out, leaving a fragile, emotionally crippled crisp of a person.

She became aware that Ben had shifted closer to her, and she could practically feel the warmth of his body, solid and tall beside her. She gave into an urge to lean into his chest, and instantly felt his chin come to rest lightly on top of her head.

“So do I. I wish I was braver.” she whispered quietly, and felt him press his mouth against her hair. She longed to closer her eyes and rest there, forever. Safe and warm, tucked into Ben’s side. She could feel his warm breath against her skin, tickling her ear, and suddenly thought what would happen if she raised her face, brought her chin up, and presented him with her lips instead of the top of her head. Would he kiss her? Would it be as stormy and desperate as last time? Would it hurt? Or would it heal?

“You’re plenty brave” he murmured, and she tilted her head to catch his eyes.

A sudden clamour in the trees nearby sent a bird squawking past them, and broke the spell that had fallen. Their horses shifted, eager to be moving, and Rey grabbed her pommel for support,
flustered and flushed as she tried to regain her composure, and her wild imaginings as she spotted another team making their way through the foliage, the unlikely combination of Hux and Finn. Hux’s usual marble pallor was gone, replaced by a healthy flush, and he was laughing at something Finn was telling him.

“How many have you guys got? We are 3 in, and killing it!” Finn shouted, and Rey looked at the map, forgotten in Ben’s hand.

“We better-“ she waved a hand in the direction of the map, and Ben grunted.

“Yeah, we’d better. But Rey – I don’t think we are done here. I don’t feel done… there’s more catching up to do” he said quietly, and she found herself nodding.

“We have time” she promised, and he gave her a relieved smile. She wondered if he thought she was a flight risk, if he actually thought she didn’t enjoy spending time with him, and worried that she might ration it to the point of non-existence. Little did he know, that seeing him was the only thing she could think off.

“In that case, let’s go win this thing, scavenger”
The boy whose life and dream and love I want to share

(The Boy I’m going to Marry - Darlene Love version.

The next morning, Rey stared at the beauty therapist as she rattled off the scheduled treatments, before she caught Jessika’s eye, who had just arrived.
“Bikini waxes for people she’d never met before? This is horrifying… I wonder what she treated the men to”

“I heard it was whiskey tasting and clay pigeon shooting” Jessika murmured, sipping a cucumber and lime juice.

“Urgh, figures” Rey muttered as she lay back and tried to enjoy the foot massage, without dwelling on what she knew was coming next.

“So, how is being a talented and wonderful interior designer going?” Rey asked, and Jessika smiled, her smooth cheeks pinkening a little.

“It’s fine, and it’s no different than when we used to roam the streets together looking for unlikely first time buyers to boss about” Jessika laughed, and Rey thought back to those old days. She had loved working with her friend and the easiness of it all. Chasing up enquiries, and hustling to make a sale, pretending to be super knowledgeable in pitches. They had just been kids then and everything had been before them, and she could never have imagined the path her life would take.

“Erm, actually, I quite like the cream one” Rey interrupted the therapist as she pulled a virulent pink from the varnish rack. The lady gave her sympathetic smile.

“I’m afraid every bridesmaid has a colour pre-selected that will compliment her gown” Rey stared speechless for a long moment, ignoring Jessika’s sniggering.

“It’s official. Catherine has gone Bridezilla on us” she said finally, watching with rapt horror as the magenta polish was stroked onto her toes.

“Anyway, returning to the topic at hand, being in magazines and invited to do segments on home makeover shows is indeed a big deal. I’m ridiculously proud of you, every day. You are my claim to fame… if I ever need one, I can say – but I know Jessika Pava!” she said, and Jessika waved her praise away with a huge smile.

“Well, I’m not saving the youth of the city like you, but it’s fun. Seriously though Rey, you do a lot of good, and it’s amazing” Rey nodded slowly.

“You’re right, between us, we are creative, altruistic, highflying and fabulous… We are amazing” she said with a laugh, and Jessika nodded sagely.

“Absolutely. Time for a top up, don’t you think?”
Two hours, a bottle of Prosecco and endless strips of hot wax and humiliating postures later, Rey lounged at the side of the pool, flipping through a bridal magazine, and watching her friends swimming.

The afternoon sun was filtering in through floor length windows that looked out over hills that had exploded in crimsons and golds. The trees were so thick, it was a patchwork quilt of unbroken colour, undulating gently into the distance.

She saw the men coming up the hill from the stables, some dressed in tweed, Hux and Ben, the others in casual clothes. She saw Poe gesturing in the window at the pool, and felt a lick of nerves and delicious anticipation when she realised they were coming in.

Since their conversation the day before, Ben had been on her mind. If Rey was honest with herself, that in itself was nothing new. Ben was never far for her thoughts, but since their ride and heartfelt conversation, thoughts of Ben had taken on a glittery, almost giddy sense of excitement, rather than the melancholy sadness that usually accompanied them.

She couldn’t wait to see him, she was looking forward to interacting with him. Things were fun and light, in a way she could hardly remember.

The men entered, and her eyes went straight to the tallest, dark headed figure bringing up the rear. They had stopped by the locker room, as they were now changed into swimwear, and Rey could hardly stop her eyes sweeping over every revealed inch of Ben’s body. Muscled, broad torso, pale and marble hard. His strong thighs, just visible below his black shorts, sweeping down in long, endless legs. His hair almost brushed his shoulder tops, and she longed to brush her fingers down through it, and then onto his shoulders, and then, just keep on going. She felt a flash of lust deep inside, Ben’s body being something that she could always call upon, even after years apart, to turn her on.

The men dispersed on entry, with Poe and Finn making a beeline to greet Jessika, and Hux headed for Catherine, who was waist deep in the water, smiling demurely at her fiancé.

Ben’s eyes scanned the place, and soon closed in on Rey, sitting beside the water, swathed in a huge white robe. He came over, and Rey tried not to drool, firmly fixing her eyes on the magazine, though they were unseeing and almost glazed with the effort.

Suddenly, he was sitting easily beside her, and when she still didn’t speak, maintaining the pretence of magazine absorption until she could make her voice sound normal, he nudged her gently with one of his gargantuan, sculpted thighs.

“Hey – be careful with that thing. It’s a lethal weapon” she muttered, flipping through the magazine.

“Sorry to interrupt your reading… you’re really engrossed in that” he remarked lightly.

“It’s fascinating, a must read, great advice” she muttered, as she finally looked up and found his face, the picture of bemusement, so much closer than she had expected.
She nearly jumped off the lounger in fright.

There was something about this confident, relaxed Ben that was so incredibly sexy, she didn’t know what to do with herself. Her poor body was on high alert constantly.

“So, I see” he murmured, his eyes on the page, and Rey looked down, finally focusing enough to read the title of the article.

“How to make your wedding night a night he’ll never forget”

She caught a glimpse of edible underwear and handcuffs, and slammed the page closed.

“Seems a little unbalanced to me” Ben remarked, before leaning back and focusing forward, giving Rey a reprieve from the laser focus of his eyes.

“Good morning?” she asked, after a long pause, because if there anything she hated in moments of embarrassment, it was silence apparently.

“Very good. Finn is a very good shot. And yours?” Ben said,

“I barely survived it…” Rey sighed, as she rested her head back on the lounger.

“All that relaxing really took it out of you, huh?” he teased, and she shot him a scowl.

“You have no idea… You don’t know how to make fudge, do you?”

“Fudge? No idea. Dare I ask why?”

“I have to make gourmet fudge, three different flavours, for hundreds of gift boxes. Take pity on me” she complained, and flashed him a poor me look. He smiled hugely. She felt 16 again, the same squirming sort of excitement to have Ben’s attention.

“I have every confidence in you, I can’t see you being defeated by a little condensed milk”

“I didn’t even know it had condensed milk in it” Rey admitted dully.

“Take pity on me and help… you’re a good cook. Everything you make is amazing” she said, giving him a winning smile.

“I love compliments with ulterior motives” he said with amusement.

“Well? Do you have something better to do?”

“What, here? At this exclusive resort with hunting, fishing, swimming and almost every other imaginable leisure activity at hand?”

“Fine, ok, I get it” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Something better than stand for hours in a hot kitchen, while you boss me around, mixing things, measuring things, and generally working hard for no reward except your company?” he continued, seeming more and more amused by the second, as Rey shot him a withering look.
“No, princess, I have nothing in the world better to do… nothing I’d rather do” he finished, and she glanced up at him.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously…. We can continue our catch up” he said, meaningfully.

“Actually, I have an idea, in terms of payment.” He said after consideration, and Rey looked at him suspiciously.

“I never sold this as a paid position… What were you thinking?”

“Nothing much, just a little game… to pass the time”

“What game?”

“20 questions… they can be about anything, but you have to tell the truth” he said.

“20! That’s too many – 3”

“10” Ben countered.

“2”

“Ok, 5”

“Deal – you’re a terrible negotiator” she said with a self-satisfied smile.

“You don’t play fair” he scolded.

“Well, all’s fair in —“ she trailed off, suddenly growing aware of the phrase she had been blithely about to throw about.

“In love and war? Which one is this?” he asked. She avoided his question focusing down on her toes, peeping out from the bottom of her oversized robe.

“You haven’t called me princess in a long time.” She remarked.

“It feels weird” she continued.

“Good weird? Or bad?”

“ Weird weird” she answered. He nodded slightly, and followed her eye line down to her toes and the pool beyond, giving a grunt of surprise suddenly. His full lips twitching infinitesimally, and Rey knew immediately what it was that he was looking at.

“Laugh and die, Solo” Rey warned, wriggling her toes, hoping it looked threatening, grateful for the sudden change in topic.

“I can’t think what you could be talking about” he avoided, as she crossed her arms over her chest and levelled him with a direct stare. Ben and his Leia Organa blood, all breeding and high society, taste and class.

“Out with it… I can’t stand the suspense” she said after an agonising moment where Ben tried hard not to laugh at her outraged expression.
“It’s my favourite colour - it just screams - Rey” He said smartly, and she let go of the laugh that had been building in her chest, falling into place with Ben, a click resounding across the years, the uneasy distance between them finally melting fully, and then, he was the emo teenager who liked to pick fights and sulk around school, and she was the little scavenger that liked to follow him.

“Why isn’t Hux putting you through some kind of bonding, torturous experience?” she complained, leaning back and shifting her gaze to the pool, where Catherine and Hux had met and he was actually smiling admiringly down at her nail varnish choice. Love was blind, it was official.

“Who says he hasn’t? You should see my toes” Ben quipped, shifting back against the double lounger, bringing his long arm into close contact with hers.

“Still, it’s not fair you know… Men get hunting and drinking, partying and being totally irresponsible. Women get a spa day full of awful nail varnish choices, and involuntary bikini waxes, some present” Rey snorted softly, and Ben let out a short bark of laughter at her words.

“What?? It’s true… I don’t think presents should require the application of an ice pack afterwards.” she argued, feeling his warm gaze come to land on her face, and then, travel slowly down her body, to where her robe was tightly belted.

“I wholly agree” he murmured, his voice slightly censorious.

“Oh, that’s right, I remember – you don’t like them” Rey said with a start, recalling a long ago conversation with Ben about that very subject.

Rey glanced at his expression, suddenly become aware of how intimate the teasing conversation had taken them.

His hazel eyes shifted to hers, and she could feel his breath tickling her lips, so close had they become.

“I find them… unnecessary, and needlessly painful. It’s not an area that should experience anything but… pleasure” he said, and she felt his words send a prickle of heat spiking along her nerves.

She needed to let off some steam, or she was going to blow. Deciding against mentioning how sorely long it had been since any kind of pleasure was received, bikini area, or anywhere else, Rey launched herself to her feet.

“I’m going in. You coming?” she asked briskly, kicking off her flip flops and tugging at her robe tie. Ben sat back, regarding her with great attention, her mercurial eyes not missing one of the nervous heaving’s of her chest, or rapidly beating pulse in her neck. He opened his mouth to respond, but she never heard it. At that moment, she felt strong hands go around her waist, just exposed from under her stifling robe, and then Finn’s voice was in her ear, sneaking up on her from behind.

“Geronimo!” he called, throwing himself headlong into the pool, and taking her with him.
The kitchens were quiet, and Rey found a long additional counter space where the manager had agreed to let her make the dreaded fudge.

She had several recipes downloaded on her phone, she had bought all the ingredients, now all she needed was to suddenly be able to bake, and everything would be great. She jumped as the door near her opened, and turned to see if it was Ben, remembering too late that she had planned on looking casual when, or if, he showed up.

Ben. The name made her stomach twist itself into knots and her heart pound. She had gone so long, barely thinking of him, hardly allowing herself too. Like a sugar addict on a diet, the only way to be without Ben was to avoid reminders of him, thoughts of him completely, or else lose herself in longing. And she had made a life for herself, one that she was proud of. Now though, confronted with the man himself after so long apart, she wondered if she had just been trying to prove something to herself by denying them both each other’s company. Trying to see if she could do it – be whole without him.

“Sorry I’m late” his voice made her jump, coming unexpectedly from the other direction, and she soothed her expression and smiled at him.

“It’s fine. Thanks for helping, I know there’s more exciting things to do” she said, handing him a black apron with the name of the hotel restaurant scrolled along the top.

He dropped it over his head and tied it behind him, the movement pulling his tight black t-shirt hard across his broad shoulders, and Rey had to look away, busying herself with looking for the recipes on her phone. She jumped again as his hand brushed her shoulder, and glanced up to find him pressing a swift kiss to her forehead.

“Hi” his hazel eyes were warm and expectant on her face, his wide mouth lilting in a half smile as he looked down at her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, caught in his gaze, half expecting him to tilt his head down and press a kiss on her lips, a muscle memory from long ago, still so deeply ingrained.

“Just saying hello” he said, dropping his hand and leaning on the counter, his hip brushing hers.

“Are you alright? You seem a little jittery” he remarked, moving away as she flushed and stepped closer to the bench to put a little distance between them. The proximity of him felt obscene for some reason, and she felt it was safer to be out of reaching distance.

“Fine, just worried how we’ll manage all… this” she said, waving a hand over the assorted ingredients.
“It’ll be fine, don’t worry” he reassured her, before silence fell between them. Being alone with Ben, still so jarring and unusual, and completely normal all at once.

“Thanks for helping” she said again lamely, trying to work out how to be around him and not cease to function. It seemed enough to just keep breathing, never mind acting like an actual human being.

“Rey, if you’re thinking you can get out of our 5 questions with enough thanks… you can’t” he said with a grin. Rey marvelled at his playful expression.

“How can you do that?” she asked suddenly.

“How can you do that?”

“Just – be so normal, so relaxed… like being here together is just an ordinary thing”

He watched a moment, his playful expression melting away, and then stood, stepping to her side and taking her hand before she could protest and pressed it to his chest, just above his heart, and she could feel it, a pounding mirror to her own.

“Who says I’m not nervous?” he asked, his low voice a pitch deeper still, a tone that sent memories of moonlight nights and tangled sheets rushing over her, and made the skin on her arms pimple with electricity.

“And if I’m acting like it’s normal… it’s because I wish it was. I wish this was my normal. I miss it.” Ben said and caught her eye. His honesty was disarming and frightening, it stole Rey’s breath away.

“And if I’m acting like it’s normal… it’s because I wish it was. I wish this was my normal. I miss it.”

“Do you?” he pressed, and she felt her heart jump into her mouth.

“Is that one of your questions?” she asked shakily, buying time. His serious expression dissolved a little into a soft smile.

“Do you want it to be?” he asked, and she shook her head. She wasn’t ready to answer that question, for him, or for herself.

“No then, it’s not. It’s optional” he said, stepping away the rounding the island, putting it between them, giving her space just when she thought all the damn inside her might burst.

“Then I decline answering just now… and I demand we get on with it” she said, forcing a little more enthusiasm for fudge-making into her voice than she felt. He held her in a steady gaze, his eyes, as always, seeing everything she didn’t want to say.

“Just tell me where you want me, boss”

An hour later, they were starting on the last batch of fudge when Rey couldn’t take the suspense one moment longer.

“Ok, we’re almost finished, so you better ask those questions, or they’ll expire” she said, measuring out walnuts in industrial quantities.
Ben was dicing cranberries with his back to her, and at her words, glanced over his shoulder, his look calculating.

“Ok, how’s Jack? No superficial answers please” he said shortly, and Rey hide her surprise at his question.

“He’s… really really good. He’s in Italy with Luke, you know. He’s healthy, happy, he loves it at the institute. He’s been fixing the place up, all the little things that Luke and I never got around to doing… he has a list a mile long”

“I know, I bet it’s the same one he’s had since I was a teenager” Ben said with a fond smile.

“He travels around and eats well, he still fixes up those vintage radios and sells them at the antiques market once a month. He’s happy. Really, truly happy. And him and Luke are good company for each other” Rey said.

“Two grumpy old men together?”

“Exactly” she laughed, and flashed Ben a warm smile.

“That was a good question… you may continue” she teased, as he brought the cranberries over and propped a hip on the counter near her.

“Why thank you, question two then… How are you?” he asked, and Rey felt the light atmosphere shift a little, become a little more charged.

“I’m good, as you see” she said.

“No superficial answers, please” Ben reminded her. She busied herself with mixing the fruit and nuts together. She felt that old familiar urge to run and hide from such a question, such searching curiosity demanding whole hearted honesty, and then she had a calming realisation. This was Ben, and she could always tell him anything. He had seen the darkest parts of her, cleaned another man’s blood from her face. He would never judge her.

“I am happy, mostly, though I don’t know if anyone is happy all the time. I love my work, working with the students, and reaching new communities. Even just making a difference to one person is everything. There is so much to learn, and so much to pass on, and now there is recognition in the work, which is strange and new, but it makes me proud as well. Proud of where I came from, and what I’ve learned, and the people I’ve met along the way that made it possible… like you, Luke and Leia. I have my own apartment, and it’s a shoebox and you’d definitely not approve of the neighbourhood, but I love it so much. I painted it myself, and whenever I open the door and walk in, I just feel satisfied, like I remember that I’ve accomplished something. I see my friends often enough, but less often than I’d like. I love to visit Luke and Jack. All these things make me happy.”

She finished softly, missing out the most important part, that there was a Ben shaped hole in that shiny, new world, a space that seemed to grow a little harder to ignore every day. He was nodding slowly, watching her with an unreadable expression. She focused on the mixing bowl in front of her, hoping he wouldn’t notice how long she had been mixing the same thing pointlessly.

“Sincere enough?” she asked, and was rewarded with a slow nod.

“Sincere indeed” he murmured, turning to face her slightly, his dark gaze finally trained on her profile.

“I’m happy for you, and I mean that, in all sincerity” he said.
“I know” she said, and caught his eye.

“You’ve always wanted the best for me, even though we might have disagreed about what that was… but I never doubted the intention” she said. His chest expanded deeply, and he seemed about to speak, but settled for arranging the baking trays.

They worked side by side a moment, but the air between them was thick with the past and the questions Rey feared and longed for in equal measure.

“I notice an omission from the things about your life that you are happiest about.” He said finally.

“Love life” he continued.

“Not much to say, happy about or not. Was that a question?” she asked lightly, hoping to steer the conversation back to something less heavy.

“Not quite, here is one. Who ended it between you and Dameron?”

“It was mutual” she said, avoiding his gaze.

“Is that your sincere answer?” he asked and Rey shrugged.

“It’s as sincere as it can be. I don’t know what happened… the way we fell apart, the way the feelings just gradually shifted into friendship. There was no dramatic end, there was no colossal revelation. Affection just slipped away, bit by bit, day by day until there wasn’t any left. I know he felt the same. In the end it felt as though the conclusion of some grand experiment, the results in, and found lacking. The study was definitive. Poe and I are just friends, and fated to always be so.” She ended. She gave him a sideways glance, to see him tidying up, his strong arms employed in wiping down the surfaces, and giving her time to collect herself, without scrutiny.

“Maybe all relationships end up that way, if you stick around long enough, I don’t know” Rey said, and tried not to let her disillusion show too much.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curiosity” Ben supplied.

“You know, this isn’t really fair, I’m baring my soul for you, and I haven’t asked you a single question” she suddenly said, deciding that the whole exchange was entirely too unbalanced.

“That wasn’t the deal, princess” he said with a smirk, though after she aimed a dishtowel at his head, he nodded.

“Ok, you’re right. Ask away. I’m an open book” He said. Rey turned to him and folded her arms, scrutinising him from top to toe. The view was mouth-watering.

“Ok, relationships – tell me all about them” she instructed.

“Since I saw you last, there’s been 6 relationships, some lasting only a few weeks, two of them about 6 months.” He said, and Rey tried not to blanche.

“Wow, six… that’s pretty impressive compared to my one” she said.

“But one with feeling, trumps six without” he remarked, and she was instantly soothed by the reassurance. Her questions must have shown on her face.
“They are perfectly lovely people, accomplished and interesting, kind and funny. I am still in touch with most of them. But I could never quite… feel, as I should. Maybe there are parts of me that’ll always be broken.” He said. Rey stared at this Ben, so able to talk about his feelings and his past.

“What happened with –Snoke-“ he said, and Rey felt goose bumps creep up her back. She saw him swallow hard, though his open gaze was unflinching.

“Ben – you don’t have to –“ she stared, a quiet whisper, and he shook his head instantly.

“No, Rey – I do. I have to. If I don’t talk about it, if I keep it inside… it’s poison.” He said, stepping toward her, and raising a hand to tuck a stray hair back behind her ear. She was transfixed by this man, the courage she saw before her.

“If I don’t talk about it, it makes him into the things my childish self saw him to be – a monster… but he wasn’t a monster, he was just a man, just a terrible person, and he can’t influence my life anymore, I don’t let him. In that way, every day, I forget him more and more – and he’d just hate that.” Ben said, a smirk curling his lip. Rey couldn’t stop herself from reaching up to him, her fingers gently touching the plane of his cheek, along his defined jaw.

“You’re the bravest person I know… I want to be just like you when I grow up” she said quietly, and he smiled, a rare, full all-encompassing smile. It made his eyes dance, caramel in the lights above, his teeth flashed white against his stubbled jaw.

“I’m pretty sure that’s my line” he murmured, that smile still in place, a time travelling grin, and Rey couldn’t stop herself from reaching up to him, her fingers formed the imaginary shutter, clicking it. Time stopped between them, lingered in that twist of destiny, tiny red threads snapping out in different directions, each carrying a different fate, spinning off into oblivion, and they stood, paused at another crossroad.

“What’s it called?” he murmured.

“It’s a secret” she replied softly, her fingers still lingering on his skin, unwilling to break contact.

“I could make it a question” he said.

“But you won’t” he raised an eyebrow at her confident answer.

“Because-“

“Because, I’m not ready to tell you…” she said, and he nodded with acceptance as she knew he would.

“Two questions left Ben. You were talking about Snoke” she said, proud that she said his name without flinching.

“Right” he said, pulling back a little, pulling himself up to sit on the counter, and patting the metal beside him. She pulled herself up, and leaning against his solid warmth. His arm rose around her back instinctively.

“Despite my resolve not to let that poor excuse for a human being ruin the rest of my life, I still seem unable to – feel love – like I should, like I know is possible” he said, which a long look, leaving no room for her to doubt to whom he was referring. Rey thought about it for a moment, comparing it to her own experiences.

“I don’t think that’s broken. I think there are different types of love, and no two feel the same. I
can’t compare the way I felt about Poe to the way I felt about - you” she finished, after a pause, hearing the words fall into the silence that fell over them after that soft revelation.

“I mean, I don’t have your vast experience to compare things to, I have only ever really loved one person… “ she tried again to sound nonchalant, but knew she was failing horribly.

“Who?”

“You’re going to waste one of your questions on that!” she exclaimed, and turned and buried her face into his shoulder as he leaned back and tried to see her.

“Tell me, Rey” he pressed, and she hide her face like a child, trying not to pass out from the sheer overwhelming sensations of Ben’s body against hers, his smell, the soft cotton of his shirt, and the hardness of the body underneath.

“Urgh. You. You know it’s you. What a waste of a question” she grumbled as she leaned away finally, and chanced a glance at his face. He was smiling again, a pure, victorious smile that made her roll her eyes at it’s smugness, as he slid off the mental bench and stepped toward her.

And, before she could really register what was happening, as she braced her arms to jump down, Ben’s face was nearing hers, and the victorious look on his face was morphing into resolve and intensity, his own brand of serious intent, as he cupped her face and brought his lips to hover over hers. He stopped there, just when she thought she might faint, and waited.

“Kiss me, Rey – kiss me and end all this madness” he was saying against her lips. She closed her eyes and let his words wash over her.

“You have to be the one, you have to kiss me, if you want to. God, I hope you want to” he was saying, so gently she could barely make it out, the touch and voice a drug that swarmed her senses.

“What madness?” she finally managed to get out, her mind lagging behind, running to catch up.

“This separation, this needless loneliness. This exile. Let’s go home” he muttered against her lips, and she felt a tear slip out her eye, once again, Ben Solo and his cynical, straight talking poetry cracking her wide open.

He slid his hands into her hair, cradling her face like it was the most precious object. Stepping between her spread legs on the counter, he pressed slowly against her, the weight and solidity of him making her feel as though she had not even been touched by another in all their time apart, so fast did heat rip through her. She had felt lust and attraction with Cassian and Poe, she had enjoyed her sex life independent of Ben, but in all that time, it seemed to still ring true, that the chemistry between them was still something unique, still so surprising in it’s intensity and raw strength.

She leaned into him, and brought her lips to his, unable to stand the overheating sensations, the sight tremble in Ben’s hands that showed her his self-control was not as easy as it would seem. He was waiting for her, it was her decision, and she had decided.

To kiss someone you have loved and lost, someone whose memories have haunted your life like a silent spectre is to kiss a memory, and a life and blood man all at once, a ghost, who is slowly coming back to life.

She could feel the weight of their memories washing over them, a great sea of happiness and pain, fear, loss and the most sparkling and elusive sensation of all. Love. And it had eluded her, even after all this time apart, she had never felt even a shadow of what she had shared with Ben, with any other man.
It was greater than her, greater than them, this great sweep of rightness and belonging.

Ben kissed her hungrily, his lips demanding and cherishing, pursuing her, not letting her escape. It was seamless, this kiss, as though they had been practising for this moment forever, and now, it had all come together. Rey felt heat building in her, her body fairly scorching with it, as she gripped Ben’s shoulders and dug her fingers in, drawing a pleasing grunt of lust and pain from him, as he pulled her to him a little rougher, ground against her harder. It was what she wanted. It lit her up within. And as it did, those memories kept on coming, wave after wave, and for the first time in a long time, she felt fear.

How could she know that this time, everything would be better, how could she know she could survive if she lost Ben again. How could she rebuild something worth living, if there was no longer even the hope of Ben.

She didn’t know how long they kissed, only that the kitchen had fallen completely silent, and her lips were burning when Ben started to pull back.

“Ben” she breathed against his lips, and she felt his lips curl in a smile against her mouth, as he pressed sweet kisses along her cheekbones, and felt him pause when his mouth met the soft salt tracks her anxiety had been carving.

She felt as the evidence of her upset arrested him, deflated his chest, constricted something inside.

“Ben” she whispered gently, pushing him back, even when the distance between them felt like a physical blow. He was breathing hard still, his eyes searching for hers, bending from his great height to find the cause of her pain, in a moment that to him seemed only to bring joy. He was so free, unencumbered by fear, she hadn’t been joking when she’d said she wished to be like him.

“Your last question… ask me again why I never called” she said, her hands resting gently on his chest, and he stilled under her touch.

“Why didn’t you call me?” his voice was rough, almost a rasp, his expression braced against the blow he sensed was coming.

Another tear dropped from Rey’s eye and plopped down between them, hitting the plastic of her apron loudly. She met his eyes then, and told him the truth of her heart, the fears that lurked inside.

“Because I’m afraid that this love, between you and I… I’m afraid it’s too big and too heavy to carry. I’m afraid that it would break us all over again. I’m afraid of ruining you, and myself. We have made each other so sad, heartbreak I could never have imagined… and I don’t think I can survive it again. Some of my very worst memories… they are ours… you are in them. I don’t want to make more that I can’t forget” She admitted brokenly, a shudder racking her shoulders as Ben leaned forward, dropping his forehead to hers, resignation seeming to bear down on him.

He braced his hands on the counter on either side of her, and took a long time to straighten up. When he did, his face was pale and empty, worn clean of expression. His eyes took her in, running over her face, lingering on her eyes and mouth, a reverent light reflected there, and none of the disappointment she thought she would find. Disappointment in her, for being so afraid, when he was so much braver than her. Disappointment that she had forgotten how to hope.

At length, he straightened up and stepped back. Cool air rushed in and made her wince, so unwelcome and jarring.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to force you into anything you didn’t want” he said rather stiffly, and
alarmed, she pushed herself off the counter.

“Don’t say that – of course I wanted you to kiss me… I kissed you first.”

“But you regret it” he supplied immediately, his eyes seeming to find confirmation in her silence, as he turned stiffly away and picked up his jacket, making for the door. Rey watched him leave with a hundred things running through her mind.

She wanted to run and stop him, tell him she was only afraid, and she had felt more alive in the last few minutes than in all their years apart. Tell him that he was still the first thing she thought of in the morning, and the last thing at night. That hiding in their happy memories was her favourite place to be.

But she didn’t, she couldn’t. All the reasons why she was afraid were fresh in her mind, screaming at her to listen, and she did.

She had become so very good at listening and ignoring her heart lately.

Standing in the doorway, Ben turned back, a long look over his shoulder, and she tried not to picture what he saw. A timid, cowering woman, too afraid of the past to have any future.

“It’s true” Ben said slowly.

“We have hurt each other, I have hurt you - but when I look back, it’s not those memories that stay with me. The ones I remember are the very best things, the happiest times of my life, and Rey – they are our memories as well, you are in every single one. Don’t forget that. And as for making more – the prospect of a life without making more of the best ones… doesn’t seem like a prospect of any kind of life at all.”

And then, he was gone, leaving her alone with his words, and his hope, like a flare of light in a dark room.
Going to the chapel and we're gonna get married

Chapter Notes

Going to the chapel - Dixie Cups

Bells will ring,
the sun will shine.
Whoa, I'll be his and he'll be mine.
We'll love until the end of time
and we'll never be lonely anymore.

The insidiously tinny song blared out at Rey, seeming to reach into her cocoon of covers and wrench her out. Rose had set all their wedding day alarms, and had fun doing so it seemed.

Because we’re going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married.
Going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married

Rey peeked out the cover, and instantly regretted it. Her head hurt, and her body barely felt barely human. She felt like she had run a marathon, every muscle stretched and used. She swallowed, her mouth dry and tender. She poked a larger whole in her den, and peeked out, her eyes landing on a patch of carpet.

She stopped breathing for a moment, that sweet, pleasant, embarrassment free moment before she started to remember.

Her black lacy bra and little shorts she had worn under her costume were there, and they weren’t alone. A pair of black men briefs lay beside them, and she threw back the covers, memory crashing over her.

Going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married.
Going to the chapel of love.

She shot out a hand and knocked everything off the bedside table, belatedly realising that she wasn’t in her room, before grabbing her phone and turning off the alarm.

She looked around, her heart starting to beat wildly. She was alone, she realised suddenly, thankful and crestfallen at once. The door to the en-suite bathroom was slightly ajar, and she thought for a second that she could see someone inside.
“Hello?” she croaked, her throat unbearably dry.

Her phone buzzed in her hand, and she looked down at it, feeling her heart simultaneously rise and fall at the same time.

*Ben Solo calling...*

9 hours earlier

A sleepless night, where the few dreams that she had fallen fitfully in and out of involved measuring scales and backing trays, she was always measuring and re-measuring ingredients, and never getting the recipe right, followed the fudge making. The rest of the night was spent trying and failing not to think about Ben, his hands on her, his lips, hot and urgent, his words, none of which were conducive to sleep.

All day long she avoided seeing that familiar tall figure, skirting around the grounds, and hiding out in Catherine’s hotel room, though, to be fair, there was a lot to do to get ready for the big day.

She was already dreading the evening’s bachelorette activities. These things were always embarrassing, and she had almost had her fill of organised fun.

“Now, I can’t be too tired or hungover tomorrow… and no one in the wedding party can, we should probably have some kind of curfew… that includes the guys. Rey, can you be in charge of that?”

Rey was staring out the window at the leaves falling. There was an activity going on outside involving hay bales, Halloween decorations and berserk children. She watched them rushing in and out, screaming loudly, through their voices were born away on the wind before they could reach her.

“Rey?” Catherine said again, and Rey’s eyes snapped to hers.

“Be the fun police. Got it” she confirmed, as Catherine rolled her eyes at her, before turning back to
the lingering hairdresser, who was heating a curling iron.

“I’m thinking pin curls, I’m Zelda Fitzgerald, so something flapper” she was instructing, as Rose came over to Rey holding out a glass of champagne, tinged a soft, blushing pink.

“Here, it’ll help” Rose said, knocking her own on back.

“Hey, go easy on that… I might have to cut you off” Rey warned. Rose shook herself.

“Easy for you to say, you weren’t responsible for the venue tonight… this may be my last hurrah – like – literally” she muttered, and then brightened as she spotted something.

“I forgot! I finished your costume” Rose said, passing a piece of material to her. Rey looked at it. It was wide and stretchy, a forest green and black satin, with tiny white flowers embroidered on it. She looked at it closely.

“It’s the perfect obi!”

“This looks familiar” Rey remarked.

“I should think so” Rose said with a smirk, nodding her head over to a chair they had been practising putting the seat covers on. Rey saw exactly where the material had come from.

“Excellent… so I’m to wear a seat cover as a costume”

“You’re to wear part of a seat cover as a costume, geez. You’re being awfully sensitive for someone who shoved a dressing gown in their bag and called it a day. That’s weak Halloween planning my friend. Finn has had his Edward Scissorhands get up all set for months.”

“Are you’ll be?”

“Kim, naturally… cute right?” Rose said with a smile, holding up a garment bag containing a pink, off the shoulder dress.

“Cute” Rey agreed begrudgingly. What she didn’t say was that dressing gown was one of the nicest things she owned, and something she held precious to her. Ben had given it to her, and it was practically her favourite thing in the world.

“Hux and Catherine are Zelda and F. Scot Fitzgerald… is everyone going as couples?” Rey asked, sinking down into a window seat.

“I bet Poe isn’t” Rose said pragmatically.

“Helpful, but I’d rather not go as a couple costume with my ex-boyfriend…” Rey said.

“Better change your dressing gown plans then” Rose muttered, turning away as she spoke.

“What was that?” Rey asked, eying Rose’s over innocent expression.

“Girls… I’m ready to put my dress on” Catherine called, and they both looked to see her, sitting regally in her white satin dressing down, her blonde hair lacquered and secured in picture perfect pin curls.

Catherine’s dress was beautiful, an actual flapper dress, beaded piece of history. Ivory and silver. They pulled it carefully on, with the help of the hairdresser and tissue paper to prevent her make up from touching the vintage fabric.
“Wow” Rey breathed as they took in their friend, pulling long satin gloves up her arms.

“Hux won’t know what hit him” Rose said.

“Yeah, he really won’t, seeing as the bachelor party is separate from ours” Rey reminded her. Rose smacked a hand against her forehead in an exaggerated double take.

“Duh, you’re right. Ok, O-Ren Ishii… time to assassin up” Rose said, turning to the hairdresser.

“Any chance of doing something interesting with this?” she said doubtfully, earning a smack on the arm from Rey.

“Just because I don’t have waist length, jet black, poker straight hair – whatever, fair enough” she muttered, climbing into the set-up chair, dropping the whole comparison, because, well, there really none to be made between her mousy long bob, and Rose’s hair. Not one that she would win, anyway.

Half an hour later, Rey was pleasantly surprised at how her very last minute costume had come together.

The dressing gown she had grabbed, a hand painted kimono, genuinely from Japan, was a striking crimson with white and black cranes embroidered, amongst white blossom branches. It was secured around her narrow waist with the oddly perfect seat cover, clinching in her narrow waist, and Rose had even found some extra material to pad the back out, making it look like a real kimono. Her hair was pulled into an intricate bun, from the side of which a waterfall of tumbling, glittery scarlet blossoms fell. She had put on boy shorts under the outfit, in case her seat cover failed her, and on her feet, some white socks and black flip flops, which were the closest she could come to find appropriate footwear. Her face was powdered slightly whiter than usual, her cheeks a pop of vibrant pink, and her mouth, a small, red bow. Her eyes were lined in bold, long sweeping black lines. She looked much better than she had any right to.

An hour later, they were stepping into the bar that Rose had found online. It was a cavernous, wild west themed place, with endless booths and large, rough-hewn looking tables, bench sheets and barrels. She was relieved to see that the spirit of dress up was strong with the crowd, and they weren’t out of place. The table reserved for them was near the stage, a wooden, bunting covered platform sporting a stripper pole smack bang in the middle. Rey stared at it in morbid fascination. Rose was squeezing her hand hard as Catherine’s work friends, her mother, and Hux’s stared around the place, perching bags on the long table in between the balloons and confetti guns.

“She hates it” Rose whispered urgently, her eyes glued to Catherine patrician profile.

“Just give her second” Rey advised, hoping against hope that Catherine would rally.

“Good evening ladies, let me get you started with some drinks and a couple of rounds of shots” said a heavily accented voice from behind them. They turned as a group to see several muscle bound men approaching, t-shirts without an inch to spare and bulging biceps bearing down upon on them, carrying large trays with drinks. One singled Catherine out, handing her a special shot that was actually fizzing and on fire it seemed, and Rey worried for her eyelashes for a moment,
before, to her relief, her friend knocked it back.

“Let’s party” Catherine announced, and the assembled group relaxed into giggles and exclamations over the staff, as the handsome waiters set out handing out shots and generally being charming to one and all.

“Here you go gorgeous” the one with the accent, Irish maybe, announced, passing Rose a shot. Rose whose only respond was to turn as pink as her name sake and giggle, hanging onto Rey’s arm.

“Jesus Tico, pull it together” Rey muttered, as the bartender turned his patented smile to her, and quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Well, hello – shot?” he enquired, holding out a virulent pink shot. Rey shook her head firmly.

“I’m alright, thanks”

“Not drinking at a hen party? You’ll never survive” he said, shifting into a conversation seamlessly, as he mixed a pitcher of cocktail from the little bar at the end of their table. Rey sat down in her chair, pushing Rose into one beside her.

“I’m fine” she said drily.

“Of that – there’s no doubt” he quipped, his eyes dropping over her a second, before flashing her the most outrageously flirtatious grin. She resisted rolling her eyes. He finished mixing a batch of something orange, before meeting her eye again.

“Sloe comfortable screw?” he asked then, and Rose let out a snort that sent water shooting out her nose.

“Excuse me?” Rey asked, grabbing paper towels to mop up the mess. He lifted the jug of cocktails, before grinning wickedly.

“Sloe comfortable screw anyone?” he called, and several girls leapt up to grab one. He filled both her and Rose’s glasses, before giving her a wink.

“If you get bored, being sober and all that… come find me” he said, before turning on his heel, and striding off back toward the bar.

“Oh man… Rey – he’s hot” Rose was saying, drinking her cocktail enthusiastically.

“Is he?” Rey muttered absently as she sipped her cocktail. Rose shot her a disbelieving look.

“If you don’t know that – you’re in a worse state than I thought” her friend said, before reaching into the bag she brought and pulling out some cards and other things that made Rey feel nervous.

“Game time ladies!” Rose announced loudly, standing up to get everyone’s attention. Rey caught Catherine’s eye, her friend’s pale cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, and she chastised herself. She was making everything about herself, when it should be all about Catherine. She may not like the man she was marrying, but she loved her, and she had been a good friend to her. She owed it to her to try and have fun.

“The first part of this game is called…. Firsts. Roll the dice, answer the question for that number, and move on”

Rey gamely rolled the dice, as everyone waited with bated breath.
“Number 3” she announced, and Rose looked up her cards.

“First job!” Rose called out, and Rey let out a relieved laugh. They went around, the highlights being when Hux’s mother rolling ‘first sexual position’. The game then moved onto worsts, and they started around again. This time Rey got worst kiss., which was an easy one.

“It’s Poe isn’t it!!” Jessika practically shouted, providing evidence that the drinks were only getting stronger and coming more frequently. Even in her role as fun police, Rey had decided to join in at least till midnight, when she could start to sober up and make sure everyone got home at a reasonable hour.

“No – not Poe” she reassured a few of Catherine’s co-workers who had looked a little disappointed at the exchange.

“His name was Matt, and he was perfectly nice… and a terrible kisser” she announced, thinking back to the experience, not even so long ago. It had only been about a month after Poe had moved out, and one night she had gotten drunk at office drinks and agreed to go on to another party. There, she had been chatted up by one of his friends, and she had let it happen, enjoyed the attention, when she had started to feel desperately alone. Not just since Poe had moved out… long before then, years before. She had begun to truly understand that you could still be lonely, surrounded by people. He had been tall, very tall, and dark, long hair brushing his collar. If she squinted in the low light, with alcohol running through her veins, she could almost imagine he was someone else. Someone who felt like home. Someone she had never felt lonely near. Someone she was always trying to forget, and desperately trying to remember every day.

It had been sobering, the strong liquor on his breath, a sloppy overenthusiastic tongue and an unpleasant habit of rubbing his stubble against her chin and lips, harder than perhaps he meant to. It was over fairly quickly, and she’d sported a beard rash for a week as a souvenir, while avoiding her co-worker and his teasing.

“Best!” Rose called out, and the ladies around the table drummed the top, the party atmosphere in the place fitting their jovial mood perfectly.

Rey took the dice, and rolled

“Six” she called to Rose, who was enjoying her role as ring leader, prowling up and down the length of the table in her Wynona Ryder get up. She held up her card, and her face lit up with naughtiness. Rey groaned and dropped her head into her hands at the expression.

“Best orgasm!” Rose all but shouted, as their friends laughed and cat called. When she hesitated they called her out, and she waved them off, laughing.

“Ok, ok… best orgasm… must be… 5 years ago, maybe 6”

“What?! Boo!! Bartender, we need a screaming orgasm over here!!” Jessika called, drawing the attention of several groups of guys standing near them.

“Jess” Rey hissed, but the Irish bartender was already waving acknowledgment

“On it!” he called. Rey turned her red face to Jessika, as the rest laughed.

“He better be making me a drink”

“We will just have a wait and see what’s coming, Rey dear” Catherine’s mother said, sending the group of girls back into gales of giggles.
“Ok, next!” Rose called as they tried to locate the dice.

“Wait! She never said who” a voice called, and Rey stilled, feeling her face flare with embarrassment again. She looked up and met Catherine’s eyes, and realised it was her who had spoken. Catherine, who undoubtedly already knew.

“An ex” Rey said

“Which one?” Catherine pressed, and Rey stared hard at her, wondering why she was forcing her to share with everyone.

“Ben” she said evenly. A co-worker of Catherine’s leaned forward interested suddenly.

“Ben Solo? You dated him? He’s on Forbes Most eligible bachelor list’ she exclaimed to the assembled company, sending the eyebrows up of several women there.

“Yes, Ben Solo has come far in recent years, since his mother’s passing, a terrible thing. He has become very close to Armitage, who would only keep the best company” Hux’s mother was saying and Rey couldn’t help the expression that crossed her face at the mention of Hux’s attributes. She looked up to find Catherine’s eyes on her, and quickly composed her features.

“Is he single now?” someone asked her directly, and she could only bring herself to shrug.

“I’m going to find out at the wedding tomorrow” the girls said, with a mischievous smile.

“Go for it” Rey said dully, looking up as the handsome bartender reached her side, carrying a cocktail.

“I hoped it was for you…” he murmured as he set down the drink.

“Thanks” she said, taking a quick sip, desperate for the alcohol to smother the squirming sensation in the pit of her stomach at the questions, and all the chatter going on around her, mostly about Ben.

“You could end it all you know” Rose said sitting down beside her, and tapping on her phone distractedly.

“How’s that”

“By throwing your hat in the ring… if you don’t want Ben to be single… don’t let him be” Rose said.

“It’s not that simple”

“Isn’t it?”

“You don’t know what it’s like – to be hurt like that… to willingly open yourself up for it again… I’m not that much of a masochist” Rey said. Rose pondered her words a moment.

“Ok, I get that, however… if we are talking about suffering and certainty, I would say that not going for it is the only certain way to suffer. Is being without him really ok? Are you happy? Are you willing to feel like you feel… forever? If so, then that’s fine. If not – well, going for it at least has the potential of working out, of being happier, maybe forever… you can’t win, if you don’t play. It doesn’t work out, you haven’t lost anything. You aren’t happy anyway” Rose finished, catching Rey in the eye with her dark, soulful gaze, the one that saw into people’s hearts and
changed lives.

“You’re a bad influence” Rey muttered, drinking more of her cocktail, grateful for the caffeine boost. The hot bartender had done the rounds, and was now picking up empties.

“Good?” he enquired, looking at her drink. She nodded.

“Thank you, it’s the best screaming orgasm I’ve had in a while” she said wryly.

“Yeah, 5 years” Rose chimed in loudly, and Rey could have killed her.

“5 years, that’s practically a crime. I’m Connor by the way” he said, smirking at her, as he leaned forward, and surprised Rey by bringing his finger up to her mouth, and wiping the corner. She stiffened, taken aback by the unwanted contact.

“A little cream there” he murmured, as Rey leaned away.

“No offense, but she has a boyfriend… we’d like to order more shots please” Rose was saying, waving madly at Connor, and sending him away. Rose scowled at his departing back.

“Wow, bartender went from hot to gross just like that… and that sure is some shitty timing right there” Rose announced, looking at Rey a little apologetically.

“What do you mean?” Rey asked, even as the crowd parted before them, and a pair of dark eyes, fixed on her with intensity, pulled her gaze to him. He was standing with Hux, and Rey spied the rest of the groomsmen and Hux’s friends nearby.

“Looks like time might be up on deciding what to do about Ben” Rose murmured, as several of the women at their table also saw him, and started whispering to themselves. Make up compacts were coming out of purses, and lipstick was being wielded like a weapon. And Ben, oblivious to it all, watched her with that same hungry intensity he had always possessed.

“So Rey, what are you going to do?”
“So Rey, what are you going to do?” Rose’s words spun around Rey’s head as she stared at Ben across the bar, before wrenching her attention gratefully away when Finn suddenly appeared, his Edward Scissorhands outfit dead on, rounding the table and pressing a kiss to Rose’s head.

“Girl number one, I love you, girl number 2, love you too! Are you ladies having fun?” he asked, as he kissed Rey on the temple too, and smiled around the table of girls, as everyone welcomed them.

“Catherine, wow” Poe said, as he appeared next to Finn, pulling a face as Hux passed him, striding over to Catherine, who was smiling wider than Rey had ever seen.

“Keep it to yourself Dameron” he said, reaching his fiancé, and spinning her out her seat and onto the dance floor.

“Miss I have this dance, Miss Phasma?” he murmured, as they went toward the dance floor. He spun her out and back into him, together they made a sharp couple, moving around the dance floor in perfect synchronicity.

“Did you plan this?” Rey asked, as Rose and Finn broke off a long, slow kiss. Rose nodded.

“Hey, I helped!” Finn protested.

“That’s true sweetie, but it was mostly Ben. He asked what Hux would like to do on his last night of bachelorhood, so to speak… and he wanted to spend it with Catherine, like he wants to spend every night.”

“Vomit” Jessika called from the end of the table.

“Ben planned it?” Rey asked.

“Yep, who’d have thought it, Solo’s a romantic” Finn said, sitting down beside Rose and dropping an arm around her shoulders.

“What do you say, are we next?” he asked her, and she smacked him lightly on the chest.

“Don’t joke about that” she chastised.

“Hey, who’s joking? When are you going to make an honest man out of me?”

“Maybe when your boss gives you enough time of work to take me somewhere beautiful and ask
me” Rose said, and Finn angled his head toward Rey.

“She’s talking about you, you know” he said, and Rey laughed.

“Hey, I’m ready to approve proposal trips anytime” she said, happy as always to see her two best friends as in love as they were in high school, even while a tiny and hateful part of her wondered if she would be the one left behind.

She looked around for Ben, and didn’t see him, the crowd was thick and the lights had lowered dramatically.

“I think I’m going to go to the bathroom” she said standing.

“Do you want company?” Rose asked and Rey shook her head.

“I’ll be right back” she promised and started to weave in and out of the people clustering on the edge of the dancefloor, and the even thicker crowd by the bar. She heard a distinctive laugh, low and rumbling, and looked to the side to see Ben, standing with some of Hux’s family as well Catherine’s father. She caught his eye as she passed, and that fleeting contact felt charged. She slipped toward the bathroom and went in, thankful there was no line for once.

She looked at herself in the mirrors over the sink, and tried to see herself as Ben saw her. She was older, it was undeniable, but not so different. It was that quality to her eyes, something in her laugh, that was different. Restraint. She had grown older and learned restraint, self-preservation. It was natural and mature and yet, when it came to Ben, it felt like cowardice. She almost yearned for the time she could throw herself into him with all her heart, and have no regrets about it. But once burned, twice shy, as Luke was fond of telling her.

She tucked her kimono back in, and fixed her hair, freshened up her lipstick and left the room. Walking back down the dark hallway toward the music, she felt on high alert. She couldn’t stop watching for him everywhere. It was like she had been sleepwalking through the last few years and she had suddenly woken up. Every sense was magnified.

She headed back past the bar, not seeing Ben anywhere, even as she kept her searching casual.

She arrived back at their table, and stood beside Jessika and Poe who had moved to the edge of the dance floor.

“Look at them, it’s sickening isn’t it?” Jessika said, as she gestured toward Catherine and Hux. They were moving in time to a slow, romantic song just starting, his hands caressing her back lightly, as they talking together, shared smiles, and generally seemed completely oblivious to the world around them.

“Yeah” Rey sighed.

“I want it so much” Jessika continued plaintively.

“Yeah” Rey agreed.

She swayed to the music, feeling her heart being torn in two for a moment, between the life she wanted, and the one she was scared to risk losing. The slow, steady guitar pulled her into its melody, and the melancholy words spoke to her.

There's a paperclip resting on my countertop
Sunday morning I forgot
What it's like to lose a friend

She didn’t see him approach, her back was to him, she was sure that she hadn’t glimpsed him, and yet, she knew exactly when he reached her. She could feel the pull of him, his heat, his attention like a laser on the nape of her neck, painted white to match her costume.

“Rey” he said by way of greeting, and she nodded, still without turning, trying to school the relief on her face away to nothing.

“Ben” she said, and felt his hand brush her waist as he leaned into her, his soft words spoken against her ear, just for her.

“Are you dancing?” he asked, his voice was low and thrumming.

Yesterday
How it seems so far away
And I've said all I can say

“Are you asking?” She said softly, the words leaving her without thought, unbidden and totally instinctively. Because it was Ben asking his father’s words, and she’d never leave him there alone.

She turned to see him, standing tall over her, dressed as a samurai, his black and white kimono covered in what looked like pretty authentic armour. His long hair was held back in a top knot, and Rey knew in her heart at that moment she had never seen anyone so beautiful. Of course, he was a samurai, she thought, he was the other side of her soul.

“Always” he said, his solemn face melting into a smile, a heart wrecking one, as she took his outstretched hand, finding his skin warm and soft, his long fingers immediately enveloping hers. She stepped toward him, following his lead onto the dance floor, where people were already swaying to the undoubtedly romantic song.

All in all it's a beautiful day
And I wake up all alone
I cannot help but run away

He turned and pulled her gently toward him, his hands going to her hips, and holding her there, as hers slid up to his shoulders, her face tilting back to see him. They swayed together, and she couldn’t stop looking at him, drinking him in, missing him, even from the night before. How would she cope when the wedding was over, she swallowed that question away.

Now I'm afraid
That it's all in my head
Don't you know
That it's all in your head?

“Stop looking at me like that” she murmured, and he raised an eyebrow at her words.

“In what way?”
“Hungry” she said after a pause, finding the exactly right word to describe the look on his face. He smiled, those full lips she had kissed a hundred times or more curving in a generous smile.

“I don’t think I can help it” he admitted. He spun her out, and pulled her back in, and she found herself closer than she had been before.

“Try” Rey said breathlessly, that look he was giving her was doing things to her stomach that was unsettling.

“This is me trying, sweetheart” he said, and she let out a laugh at his words, resting her forehead on his chest for a moment, smiling there, before leaning up and reaching her hand toward his face. He stilled, his teasing expression melting into one of heart-breaking emotion. She traced her thumb over his lips.

“This suits you so much”

“This what?”

“This smile… this happiness. It really suits you Ben.”

“Believe it or not, being around you is giving me a lot more reasons to smile” he said.

“Yeah, me too” she said, realising as she did how true it was. She loved her life, her job and her friends, but smiles and laughter weren’t something that occupied much time. Being loving and affectionate felt like flexing a muscle she had forgotten she had. Her heart, a little dusty, a little ignored, was thumping slowly and painfully back to life being around Ben again.

“I think we are making your admirer jealous” Ben said, his dark eyes shooting over her shoulder, as he turned her so she could see. The bartender, Connor, was watching them as he dried glasses. Rey sighed.

“So, you saw that”

“I saw that” he confirmed, though the crinkle to his lips was not angry or even vaguely threatened.

“We probably look like a couple” she said, indicating their matching costumes.

“Probably so, but perhaps we should kiss, just to make sure” he suggested, and she gave him a half-hearted push. He pulled her back in, and she couldn’t resist resting her head in her spot on his chest, and letting the romantic song wind around them, slowly fading away, being replaced with a familiar upbeat melody.

What you’re drinkin’
Rum or whiskey

“Is that what you want?” she asked hesitantly as they pulled apart, and the couples around them started to dance more animatedly.

“To kiss you?” Ben asked, looking down at her so serious and so close.

I’ll never forget you
They say we’d never make it
My sweet joy, always remember me
The alcohol she had been drinking was burning through her veins, not enough to make her reckless, but enough to make her brave.

“That – and the other” she said, the words that scared her inside so badly.

“More than I can express” he replied, as serious as she was. To date Ben again, to give her heart back to the person who had broken it, not so long ago, to the only one she had ever loved. She thought of those six women he had dated while they were apart. Was it easy for him now? Was he so fixed that if she said no, he would simply keep dating until he met the one? Another one?

But to deny herself what she so desperately wanted, the chance to be with Ben, enjoy feeling alive and full and complete for another shining moment, because of fearing the future. Well, she had always been braver than that. Was she not allowed that moment, fleeting though it might be, another, beautiful memory to hold inside and protect, to fuel her through the loneliness of her life.

“Oh” she said suddenly, and Ben stopped, her words freezing him in place with surprise.

“Oh?”

“Oh” she said again, and nodded decisively. He stared at her, his mouth parted, his eyes on hers, searching for her meaning, for her conviction and her certainty, whatever he found there must have convinced him.

He suddenly reached down and pulled her close, his hands on her waist lifted her effortlessly against him, and he held her against him, spinning them around a little, and she laughed, the fairy lights over the dance floor dancing before her eyes, and she leaned her head back, and let the swirling sensation wash over her.

She would have what she could of Ben, and it would be enough. Having decided, she felt strangely peaceful. Ben lowered her slowly down his body, his strength making her feel protected and weightless.

“Yes to the kiss or yes to the couple?” he asked, his dark eyes burning into hers. She reached out and tucked a stray hair behind his ear that had escaped his bun.

“Yes to – tonight… I want to be with you” she stated as calmly as she could, even as the brazenness of that declaration threatened to devour her. His eyes held hers a moment, and she almost saw the tiniest flicker of disappointment there, even as he smiled, and lowered his face to hers.

“Princess, I’ll take what I can get” he murmured against that sensitive place there, sending a flush through her entire body.

“Scoundrel” she breathed as he proceeded to turn her inside out, surrounded by people on all sides.

“You like me because I’m a scoundrel” he whispered, and she looked up at him and couldn’t help smiling, biting her lip. She saw him in all his ages just then. The lanky misfit teen who suffered her adoration until he started to notice her as more than his plucky sidekick. The broken and determined young man who had worn a mask carefully created to keep the world out, and had
never even seen how she would break it apart, that he would outgrow it, and some day, realise he had become bigger than his demons. Now, this man, warm and funny, confident in his own skin, finally unafraid.

He was the most dangerous of all.

“Maybe so. The scavenger and the scoundrel, we should fight crime” she joked, as he turned his attention to her lips.

“We do enough, now stop talking and kiss me damn it” he said, and swallowed her giggle as he leaned forward and finally captured her mouth. His fingers slid up to her neck, as his lips teased and sucked and generally undid her. He cradled her face as though it was precious, and she sagged against him as another couple bumped them, hardly surprising as most people were dancing energetically, while they were standing stock still kissing, as though there were no other people in the room, maybe even the world.

“Catherine” Rey breathed as they paused for breath, and Ben pressed a breathless kiss to her forehead.

“I’m Ben, remember” he said cheekily, as she turned to leave the dancefloor.

“I have to check in with her… I’m the fun police” she said, taking his hand and tugging him after her.

She was saved from his response to that, as they almost ran headlong into the very person she had been looking for.

“What was that curfew again?” Rey asked, smiling up at her friend, who towered over her, almost matching Ben in height.

“I don’t know… maybe we should just let people be” Catherine said, her eyes dancing with happiness. She saw the moment that both her and Hux registered Ben’s hands on Rey’s waist, a real smile curling Catherine bold red lips as she looked at Ben.

“Benjamin, a word?” she murmured, and pulled him to the side, leaving Rey and Hux awkwardly standing on the edge of the dance floor. Ben relinquished his hold of Rey reluctantly, his fingers holding on until the last, before slipping away. Rey watched as Catherine took Ben over to the seating area, speaking all the while.

“Rey?” Hux’s voice jolted her from her prying, and she turned to see him shifting a little uncomfortably beside her.

“I wonder if I might take this opportunity to speak with you?” he said, and Rey suppressed the gaping expression she felt. Hux had never willing sought her out, except to be cruel and hurtful toward her, so she couldn’t quite imagine speaking to him civilly. He was waiting patiently and even that bothered her. He had obviously been put up to speaking to her by Catherine, and it rankled.

“I’m getting a drink” Rey muttered, and headed toward the bar.

“Mojito please” she ordered, thankfully from a different bartender, and watched idly as her drink was mixed. Her heart was escalating wildly between mad elation at the thought of having Ben to herself for the rest of the evening, and a strange, thread of fear at what the morning would bring alongside it.
“Allow me” Hux said, passing his credit card over as the bill came. Rey snorted into her cocktail.

“Thanks, I guess we are best friends now” she said bitingly, hating the harsh tone to her voice, but unable to help it. Everything with Hux was so muddied, it had been much simpler before Ben had told her about their shared childhood experience, and she had felt a sliver of sympathy creep into what had been a perfectly black and white loathing.

Hux merely looked pained.

“You wanted to talk? Before you start, I have no interest in forced apologies, and I don’t see us being best friends anytime soon” Rey said. Hux’s pale cheeks warmed under her harsh look.

“What I mean is if Catherine is putting you up to this, it’s not necessary-“

“She’s not. I mean, of course she would like us to get along, but she understands that we will probably never see eye to eye. I have wanted to speak to you for a long time, actually, since well before we met again at First Order, maybe even before the end of high school” he said slowly, and she stared hard at him, looking for the lies, but not finding any.

“High school for me – it wasn’t easy. I know it wasn’t for you either, I’m not comparing… but I know that Ben told you about that time… my father and Snoke“ Hux bit off his rambling sentence, and turned to brace his arms on the bar, his pale hands clenched.

“They were friends?” Rey supplied. Hux nodded.

“They shared common interests” he said darkly, and Rey couldn’t suppress the shudder that his quiet words and all they implied sent through her.

“I was afraid all the time, and weak with guilt over Ben, over my own cowardice. Then, you came along.” He glanced at her, and she nodded for him to continue. He gathered himself, and pushed on.

“You came from nothing, from tragic circumstances, you had every reason to be afraid…. But you weren’t” his voice twisted, the bewilderment he had felt still showing, even reflecting all those years later.

“You were brave and alive and full of light. That light drew Ben in, lit him up, strengthened him – saved him. But it just made me angry. It just showed me my own weakness. I hated everyone, I hated you – but I hated myself most of all” he finished, and running a hand through his usually impeccable hair.

“The night in the locker room. I’m sorry I hurt you, and scared you. I was mad, out of my mind.” He confessed softly.

“I know you probably won’t believe me, I know, but I never would have actually –“ he trailed off, seeming unable to actually form the ugly truth.

“Raped me?” she supplied, and he flinched, the words alone enough to make him ashamed. They stood in silence for a long, painful moment. Rey felt the conflict of hating the things Hux had done, even when he had been a victim at the same time as her.

It didn’t excuse his actions, she decided, but she could also remember the feeling of a cold metal pipe in her hand and the sudden warmth of a spray of someone’s blood across her face, when all she had seen was red, the darkness and pain inside pulling her down into oblivion.
The perfect imperfection of people and all the beautiful and broken ways they scrap through life. It was her in the dark of her childhood home, standing in the corridor, a bat in her hand, as her mother cried and sobbed, a man’s harsh grunting setting a harsh rhythm in the background, too afraid to open the door and save her. It was Ben, standing over Poe, his chest red with his blood and panic in his eyes. It was Hux, holding the outsider’s head under water, just long enough to knock her confidence. It was both of them standing in a red room, atop a castle of steel and glass, watching the creatures of their nightmares die.

“I wouldn’t have. I swear it” he said, and turned to her then, his blue eyes steady on her.

“I might have been a terrible person, a sorry excuse for a human being... but I wasn’t – him. I would have killed myself first.” His eyes continued to burn into hers, and after a long agonising moment, she turned away and rested her glass on the bar.

“Catherine loves you” she remarked. Hux nodded.

“Yes, as surprising as it is to me, every day. I cannot think why, it still feels like a dream... or a mistake”

“I don’t know. If I am calling someone for the answer to a difficult question, she’s usually my first choice. She’s pretty smart, and she really doesn’t make many mistakes” Rey said softly, and Hux’s shoulder’s relaxed infinitesimally.

“I don’t think she’s starting now” Rey said softly, and looked over to see both Catherine and Ben watching them.

“Thank you Rey, for letting me speak, and listening to what I had to say. Your grace is... quite something” Hux said, turning alongside Rey to watch Catherine and Ben approaching.

“If I may... be kind to Ben” Hux said suddenly, and Rey turned to look at him, raising her eyebrow at him.

“He loves you so, even if he’s doing his best not to reveal it” he finished.

“Why would he be doing that?” Rey asked, aware that Ben and Catherine were almost upon them.

“To not influence you, to not pressure you – he has quite the thing about freedom of choice, when it comes to you” Hux smiled, and Rey felt herself returning it, grateful for the rare peak into Ben’s head.

“I’ll remember that” she said with a smile, before turning to Catherine and pulling her immediately into a hug.

“Is everything... ok?” her friend asked, sounding nervous. Rey squeezed her lightly, and nodded.

“Everything is fine” she said pulling back.

“I’m just getting emotional – you’re getting married tomorrow. We are all getting so old... everything’s changing.” Rey laughed through the finest veil of tears that had sprung up. Catherine looked equally teary as she gripped her hands and nodded.

She felt Ben draw close, his large hand stroking her shoulder, and she wrapped her arm around his waist and buried her face in the side of his torso. Being able to touch him again, felt like coming home, and she stop doing it. Catherine looked at both of them warmly.
“I think you two have catching up to do, so what the hell are you still doing here? Get out of here” she said with a sniff, wiping her make up carefully.

“Are you sure? What about the fun police?” Rey asked.

“Hux can take over, it suits him better anyway” Catherine said, as Hux handed her bottle of water, and looked at her adoringly.

“Quite – Solo, better get out of here, before she comes to her senses” Hux said, and to Rey’s astonishment the two men actual parted with some kind of one armed hug, and then they left, heading for their families, leaving them alone.

Rey looked up at Ben, who was watching her with such tenderness it made her feel shaky.

“Thank you, for hearing Hux out. He needed to say it, so… thank you” Ben said and Rey shrugged.

“We all make mistakes” she said. She looked around them, at her friends having fun, and it seemed like it could be a moment frozen in time. Bound together by their pasts and enduring friendship, this group of people who had witnessed each other’s lives. Brought together to celebrate their love.

“Shall we?” she said finally, and tucked her arm into Ben’s as he turned them toward the doors.

“Lead the way”

“This might be the best thing I have ever put in my mouth” Rey moaning a little later, her hands wrapped around the largest burger she had ever seen.

“I might be offended if I didn’t agree, damn” Ben said, finishing his off in three bites. They leaned back against the booth of the 24 hour diner they had stopped at on the way back from the wedding. Rey sipped the ice water in front of her, and ate a couple of fries, before becoming aware of Ben’s causal perusal of her face. She turned to him and wagged a finger.

“No staring or being weird” she chastised, and he smiled to himself, before reaching up and untying his hair. It fell in a soft curtain, and Rey watched it with fascination.

“No staring or being weird?” he teased as he pulled the ribbon that had held it between his fingers. She was surprised to see it was red.

“It’s part of the costume” Ben said, as he held his hands out, palm up on the table top, waiting her hers. She reached out, and he trailed the ribbon across her palms, before carefully tying two tight loops in the material at either end. He then looped one onto her pinkie finger.

“Ok, do me” he said, holding his hand out, and she copied his motion. He smiled, satisfied with his handiwork, as their hands lay on the table joined by the string.
“The red string of fate?” she asked, connecting the his costume, the red string and Japanese folklore and he nodded.

“What does it mean to tie it to your pinkies? Like we are connected?” she asked. And he smiled.

“I’m sure neither of us can deny that” he said, and she shook her head.

“We really can’t” She ate the rest of her burger, handing over the final corner to Ben, too full to manage. He lunged wolfishly and ate it out her hand, nibbling on her fingers a little, making her giggle. He moved to sit beside her in the booth, both staring out into the parking lot, bathed in neon, as a cloudy, dark heavy looking sky swirled overhead. He lifted his arm, and before she even saw it, she was moving into his side, into her special place there, their joined fingers resting on his chest.

Then, almost as though she had wished it to happen, that pregnant sky gave way to gently drifting flakes of snow. She looked up at Ben in excitement.

“It’s only November!” she breathed.

“It’ll be Christmas soon” Ben said.

“I know”

“You love Christmas”

“I know… you still don’t?”

“Maybe this year” he said quietly, before shifting to pull his phone out his pocket, quite a feat with one hand tied to hers. She watched him dreamily, remembering her first Christmas with Ben, in a fogged window of a coffee shop, and 16 things with chocolate.

“Here, I have something to show you” he said, opening a gallery, and flicking quickly through. He stopped on a picture of a young man, wearing a suit, standing in a gym, looking overwhelmed by the young teenagers, who were looking at him in awe, while presenting him with something.

“Do you recognise him?” Ben asked, and Rey squinted at the picture.

“Is it – no… it can’t be…”

“It is” Ben said, his smile thick in his voice.

“Mikey?”

“Youngest employee of the foundation, and the most loved.” Ben confirmed.

Rey shook her head and breathed out slowly, her heart expanding until it felt like it might break. There were a million things she could say to Ben then, that she wanted to. How she’d missed him like one would miss a limb, if they awoke one day to suddenly find it gone. How she dreamed of him, and fantasies of their perfect, imaginary life together, had been her safe and happy place for years. How much it meant to her, that he had continued her work in the poor communities of the city, and expanded it to the point where a real, tangible difference was being made. How he gave her hope, hope that one day, she too would find her place in her life and the world, and then, she would belong, like she had always wanted.

It was all too much, and there was too much uncertainty. Tomorrow loomed over her, and the fear
of returning to a life without Ben in it, once again threatened to crush her. Instead, she pushed it all aside, because to voice the good, would be to say the bad also, and she didn’t want that. Instead, she pushed it all inside, and turned to look at the man she had loved for a lifetime.

“Ben – let’s go” she whispered.

The snow had started to lie, and as they walked across the parking lot, and Rey internally mused that everything that evening had felt like a dream, the universe conspired to bring her back to earth, literally. Rey felt the ground give way beneath her. Her sandals, not exactly designed for walking in slush, slid out, and she went down, faster than even Ben’s grasping hands could prevent. She hit the pavement hard, the jolt echoing through her bones, her head meeting the concrete hard. She heard Ben swearing, and then being lifted, but was too busy assessing all the sore parts, as he lifted her against his chest and hurried them to the car.

“Are you ok?” he asked, worry sounding in his voice.

“No! I’m not ok… that was so embarrassing” she complained as he laid her gingerly in the passanger seat of his tiny sports car.

“I mean like… is anything broken?” he clarified, as Rey covered her face with her hands.

“My pride?”

“Anything we need to visit the ER for?”

“No”

“Thank god” he breathed, driving slowly through the thickening snow.

“You realise we are going to have to trek outside to take pictures in this tomorrow” she grumbled. He shot her a curious look.

“What? I’m changing the subject – go with it” she insisted, and was rewarded with his laugh.

“Fair enough, but let’s worry about tonight first.” He said, turning them into the hotel entrance, and stopping at the valet.

“Tonight… I thought we were going to… get to know each other again” she said, with a suggestive wink that might have worked better if she didn’t have road rash on one cheek. He shot her a look, and she fought the panic she felt mounting at his evasiveness. She had let herself have this one, perfect night with Ben, and she had ruined it.

“Ben – you agreed…”

“We’ll see” Ben said as he got out the car and gave the keys to the attendant, before reaching in for her.

“Put your arms around my neck” he instructed, as Rey shook her head mulishly.

“No. I can walk just fine. Everything is normal” she insisted. He let out a frustrated laugh, before leaning down and wedging his hands under her thighs and under her arms.

“Rey, you are not walking in those shoes out here again, so I can either carry you to your room like this, or over my shoulder… your choice” he said, and there as something delicious in the ultimatum. A certain, spiciness she had never experienced with anyone but Ben, the natural
“Ok… deal – you can carry me, normally – to your room” she said, and leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss on his cheek, before leaning back and smiling winningly at him. Well, she hoped it was winning, and not just desperate and horny.

“Deal” he muttered, and hoisted her up effortlessly. Her kimono parted around her knees and his eyes instantly fell to the exposed skin there.

“I hope you have something on under that thing, or else the lobby is going to get quite the view.” He murmured as he carried her through the double doors and through the shiny lobby, which was practically deserted at the late hour.

“Jealous?” she teased, and giggled as he squished her into his chest a fraction tighter for a moment.

“You have no idea” he said, reaching the lifts, and leaning over so Rey could press the button. They waited for it to come, and Rey turned her attention to Ben’s neck, which was so close to her. Pale and taut, the muscled column even smelled good, she thought, as she buried her face in and inhaled, before letting her lips wander down the exposed flesh. She felt Ben’s hands tighten on her a moment, and him swear softly under his breath, as his pace increased toward his room.

“I can walk now you know…” she said.

“Not a chance” he disagreed, and she was happy to remain in his arms. Finally, after several endless hallways, they reached his room, and he fumbled for his key card.

He put her lightly down as they entered, and motioned to the bed, as he went about switching soft lights on.

“Sit down, lets check you after the fall” he was saying. She perched in the edge of the bed, the huge thing so high her feet were dangling off the floor, and watched him. He approached her and sank between her knees. He pulled her kimono skirts to the side, and touched her knees. She gasped, looking down to see there was small cuts on each knee. He peeled her socks off, now completely filthy, and placed them to the side, before returning to her legs.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, and she shook her head.

“Does it hurt anywhere else?” he asked, all concern and genuine worry, making Rey feel a little guilty that all she could think was how to get them both naked.

“Can you help me take this off?” she asked, her fingers sliding under her obi. Ben watched her carefully, before nodding, catching the satin fabric and sliding it up and over her head and arms. As her arms fell, it pulled her kimono slightly open, and Ben stilled, his eyes sweeping back and forth over her. He swallowed hard.

“You should rest, that was a hard fall, and it’s been a long day, drinking and tomorrow…” he trailed off as Rey let the robe fall from one shoulder and then the other, sitting in silence, and waited for him.

“What were you saying?” she asked softly as he moved closer between her legs, and ran his hands up her thighs, warm, calloused palms against her smooth skin, up and down, back and forth.

“I forget” he said thickly. Before she could lose her nerve, she reached behind her, and unclipped her bra, letting it fall, and casting it to the floor. She kept her eyes on him at all times. He reached for her hair, and she leant her head forward, as he picked apart her bun, and finally, after long
moments, the heavy knot loosened, and her hair slid free, falling around her shoulders. She felt his fingers checking the back of her head, touching for cuts or tender spots.

“Sore?”
“Not too bad” she said. There was a pause as Ben drank her in, and she plotted how to relieve him of his clothes, before he cleared his throat.

“We should get some sleep”

“Sleep is overrated” Rey said, her fingers going the heavy looking armour on his shoulders, giving it an ineffectual push.

“Off please” she instructed. He reached up and pulled the heavy leather plates off, placing them to the side, and straightened up.

“You love to sleep, it’s one of your favourite hobbies” Ben reminded her.

“And so you see, if I’m willing to forgo it, you know how much I must want to do something else right now” she said, reaching for the sash at his waist. She pulled it swiftly off, and his own kimono loosened enough that she could see his pale, muscled body in the gap of the fabric. She pushed her hands inside, and Ben stifled a groan at the feel of her hands on him.

“Rey – we have to stop” he was saying as she pushed his open gown from his shoulders, and it fell down his strong back, leaving him in only tight black briefs. Her interest zeroed in on the lower planes off his abdomen.

“We will, just not yet…” she said, as she ran her hands over the chest she had missed so much.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind already?” she continued, feeling a deep seated and surprising weariness creep over her. But it wasn’t equal to her determination, not yet, at least, and she continued on, her fingers now reaching for the waistband of his briefs. His fingers caught hers, stilling her.

“Never – I’ll never change my mind. But, I don’t want our first time, this time… to be when we are so tired we can barely see straight, and you’re hurt”

“I’m not hurt – I’m fine” Rey breathed, her eyes drifting closed a little.

“You can’t keep your eyes open” he said, with a smile in his voice, as she felt him pressing her backwards, shifting her up the bed and into the cloud of soft covers. In a last burst of energy, she opened her eyes, and watched him walking around the room.

He hung up both their costumes, washed his teeth, got glasses of water all while wearing only his indecently small and tight briefs, Rey was transfixed. He handed her a warm, wet cloth for her to wipe her make up off, but she couldn’t quite manage it, more tired than she could ever remember being. He finished it for her, and she gazed up at him dreamily. She couldn’t quite believe after the build-up, the years she had spent imagining this moment, she was about to go to sleep and miss it. With a last effort, she managed to wriggle out her panty shorts and threw them in his direction.

“Now you” she commanded, as he watched the short fall to the ground.

“We are just going to sleep” he reminded her.
“You sleep naked… I know things. I know you, Ben Solo” she reminded him back, and he laughed, looking away for a moment, before turning back with a chagrined expression.

“Fine, then will you stop harassing me and let me take care of you?” he asked his hands on the waistband of his shorts. She grinned, nodding vigorously. He sighed, and bend at the waist, removing the last of his clothing and tossing it beside hers on the floor. She clapped his efforts, almost making him blush as he approached her.

“Happy?’

“Very, it is just as good as I remembered” she giggled as he got in the bed, ending up far from her side.

“Though, I didn’t get the back view. You want to get up and do a spin for me?” she asked, sliding over and bringing her naked body into contact with his. He seemed to shudder a moment, before relaxing back with a resigned sigh gathering her into his chest.

“If you go first’ he murmured. She went to sit up.

“Ok” she agreed, and he dragged her back down firmly.

“Are you trying to kill me? Just, go to sleep, I’ll parade around naked for you all morning, if you want” he said, a rumble in chest vibrating through her ear and making her relax.

“Promise?”

“I’ll do better… I’ll pinkie swear it…” was the last she heard him murmur, realising that little red string was still tied to her little finger, hanging loosely into the palm of her hand, as she closed her eyes, warm and safe, in the arms of the man she loved, and promptly fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

You guys... thank you for sticking with this story to the bitter end! I'm ready to finish it, and the end is imminent - only a couple of chapters to go.

That must be it for the angst... I guess... right... right? I mean, what could go wrong at this point?!?! (Laughs wickedly)

It's really sad to end a story with characters you've gotten to know, but I hope you'll give my new story a chance, quite different, but will also be multi-chapter, slow burn and angsty as hell. I haven't started uploading it yet, but will do as soon as this is finished.
Because we’re going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married.

Going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married

Rey peeked out the cover, and instantly regretted it.
“Urgh, this song” she complained in a dry croak.

Her head hurt, and her body barely felt barely human. She felt like she had run a marathon, every muscle stretched and used. She swallowed, her mouth dry and tender. She poked a larger whole in her den, and peeked out, her eyes landing on a patch of carpet.

She stopped breathing for a moment, that sweet, pleasant, embarrassment free moment before she started to remember.

Her black lacy bra and little shorts she had worn under her costume were there, and they weren’t alone. A pair of black men briefs lay beside them, and she threw back the covers, memory crashing over her.

Because we’re going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married.

Going to the chapel of love.

She shot out a hand and knocked everything off the bedside table, belatedly realising that she wasn’t in her room, before grabbing her phone and turning off the alarm.

She looked around, her heart starting to beat wildly. She was alone, she realised suddenly, thankful and crestfallen at once. The door to the en-suite bathroom was slightly ajar, and she thought for a second that she could see someone inside.

“Hello?” she croaked, her throat unbearably dry.

Her phone buzzed in her hand, and she looked down at it, feeling her heart simultaneously rise and fall at the same time.

Ben Solo calling...
She looked in puzzlement at her phone, and pushed off the covers, hastily covering back up when she realised she was naked, the cool air prickling her skin.

Her phone stopped ringing suddenly, and she decided she must be alone and stood up, and made her way to the bathroom.

The large, white room was empty, and she almost screamed when she saw herself in the mirror. The side of her face was a little scraped up, and her knee was already black and blue. The right side, the one she had fallen on was the worst. She sighed and approached the tired looking girl in the mirror. She looked wrecked. Her hair was out the bun, but retained a lot of the stiffness of the hairspray put on by the stylish, and her eyes felt gummy from the faint residue of the makeup she’d had on.

If this was the sight that greeted you, no wonder you legged it in the morning, she thought, casting her eye back out at the empty room. It was a little jarring. She had fallen asleep determined to have Ben, sinking into profound slumber with his burning body pressed against hers, and she could swear, she had felt their hearts fall back into sync during those long, close hours. Now this morning, she was a little embarrassed about her midnight proposition, and subsequent rejection. Even stripping off in front of him hadn’t been enough to move him. Sure, she hadn’t helped the situation by falling over and being half drunk, but still, he could have at least stuck around to be seduced by her in the morning.

She felt the sting of tears threaten that was partly hangover, partly headache from the huge egg that had already come up on her skull, and partly silly, childish feelings of abandonment from Ben disappearing on her. Something had probably come up, she knew that, in her rational mind, yet her heart, in it’s deepest, darkest recesses whispered something different in her ear. It fed straight into all her clichéd fears, and she hated it.

She went back to the bedroom and gathered her things, unable to face the walk of shame in her costume, she poked around in Ben’s drawer for something. Finding some jogging bottoms and a hoodie, she put them on and zipped it to the neck, drowned in luxurious, soft fabric and the smell of Ben, intoxicating as always.

She took her things and started down the hall to her room. She glanced at her phone. She should call him back, but it had only rung once or twice before stopping. Maybe it was a mistake, a butt dial, she thought pessimistically. She arrived at her room, and fell inside, dumping her clothes on the floor and heading straight for the shower. She was being selfish again, she thought harshly. Here it was, Catherine’s wedding day, and she was worrying about herself, again. She glanced at the time. She had only 20 minutes to pull herself together and get along to the bridal suite, hair and makeup and everything girlie was waiting there. She’d talk to Ben later, and sort everything out, though how she would face him after making a fool of herself the previous evening, she didn’t know. But there was no choice, this was Catherine’s day, and she wasn’t ruining it.

The bridal suite was bustling with mothers and grandmothers and friends by the time she got in, slipping through the door and taking off the oversized robe she was wearing, leaving only the matching slips all the bridesmaids were wearing underneath.
“Sorry, I’m here” she breathed, as Rose waved to her across the room, before making her way over, weaving in and out of excited ladies fussing over flowers and dresses.

“It’s fine, we figured you might be a little late…” Rose wiggled her eyebrows at her suggestively.

“Stop, nothing happened, unless you count face-planting in the snow” Rey said, pulling her hair back to reveal her bruised face. Rose pulled a face.

“Ouch, mood killer?”

“Definite mood killer. Is Catherine excited?”

“Cool as a cucumber, but I wouldn’t expect anything less” Rose said, turning to take in the bride, who had just emerged from the bathroom with a towel around her head.

“So… what did happen last night?”

“Nothing, well, I don’t know… we slept in the same bed, and I definitely propositioned him… he was gone when I woke up. We haven’t spoken since” Rey admitted, taking off the towel wrapping her own head, and looking around for a hairdryer.

“Did you two talk about what happens next, after all this?” Rose asked, the question that made Rey afraid to even think of.

“No, not really. He’s said something about being a couple again, and trying again… like we were.”

“You’re sceptical?” Rose prompted when she fading off, staring out the window at the falling snow. It must have kept going overnight, because everything was blanketed by a pristine white blanket, here and there, the glimpse of a crimson red tree shining through, untouched by snow deep under the forest canopy.

“I don’t know. I’m not sceptical about his feelings, I mean, I don’t think he’s lying about wanting to try again. Its what happens if we just hurt each other all over again. I know he’s dated other people, hell, Forbes Most Eligible bachelor in the city, he’d not be lonely for long, if it didn’t work. What if I’m just an option he wants to exhaust” she said in a rush, her paranoias coming to the fore as she spoke to Rose, always the confidante of her most shameful and deepest fears. Rose took her hand then, and squeezed it, her face softening in sympathy.

“Rey, there are no guarantees… love is a leap of faith”

“But what if I wanted to make it work, despite differences, despite problems, and he didn’t, he didn’t see it like I did… he didn’t fear it being over like I would” she rambled, her headache and less than stellar morning making her maudlin.

“I think you guys have some talking to do.. communication, openly and honestly” Rose started, and Rey sighed, tipped her head over, despite the pounding, and starting to roughly dry her hair.

“Ok Dr, thanks for the blindingly obvious advice, now, any chance you can get me some paracetamol before my head breaks?”

“On it” Rose called, hoping up and disappearing. She resumed drying her hair, until she heard someone say her name, and turned toward it. It appeared they weren’t calling her, but talking about her instead, Rey realised belatedly as the two girls, some from Catherine’s university, stopped their conversation and looked a little abashed to have been caught.
“Sorry, we were just talking about Ben Solo, and I told Bazine that you were his ex” one of the girls said. The other, Bazine, presumably narrowed dark eyes at Rey, her full lips pulling into an assessing pout. Rey found she didn’t really care for the challenging look in Bazine’s eyes, and shrugged.

“Yes, I am”

“Can I ask you how you met?” Bazine asked.

“In high school” Rey said shortly, brushing her now dry hair.

“Ah, I see” the other girl replied, with something of smug satisfaction on her face.

“It all makes sense now” she said, and Rey turned her full attention to the two girls, her headache and general grumpiness level too high for this conversation.

“What does?”

“Well, Ben and I were talking about relationships at breakfast, and he said something about high school sweethearts” Rey’s heart lurched at the words and their implication.

“Well? Is it a secret or are you going to share?” she asked, trying to inject some levity into her tone. Bazine looked at her nails, seemed to be enjoying having Rey hanging off her words.

“He said that the relationships we form in high school aren’t balanced or… how did he put it… fully formed, because we aren’t adults. We haven’t figured out who we are, or made our mark in the world. We have a limited pool of people to choose from, and end up with someone who is just – there… that’s all”

The girl was studying her face for a reaction, and Rey refused to give her one. She tossed her head back and savagely ripped the brush through, turning the hairdryer on again, she went back to drying her hair.

The bridesmaids dresses were forest green, and their bouquets full of crimson and gold, catching the warmth of the season. The church on the grounds was beautiful, full of light, high airy ceilings arched with wood and lights, with windows that they had cleared of snow, so the natural brilliance of the sky, clearing into a perfect pale blue, was hung overhead. They rode down to the church in a golf cart along a cleared path, shivering in puffer jackets, with wellies under their dresses. All thoughts of phones and speaking to Ben had been put aside, the reality of what was happening too immediate to ignore.

Catherine was getting married. And she looked otherworldly, her pale skin and white blonde hair against the snow, her floating gown and veil, and towering height, like a goddess descended among mortals to bless them.

They drew up outside the church, just the bridesmaids, and waited for Catherine and her father to come down, teeth chattering outside, giggling with excitement. Rey’s breath fogged the air, and she tucked her hands deeper into the coat, as the door to the church open behind them.
“Come and get warmed up inside” Finn whispered, pulling his half-frozen girlfriend inside. The interior of the church was cozy, lit with candles and the soft murmur of conversation as people awaited the arrival of the bride.

They shed their coats in the foyer, and carefully changed shoes, leaving the wellies to drip dry at the side. Rey caught a glimpse of the walk down the aisle. It was lined with tea lights, and more autumn flowers, filling the room with natural splendour. She glimpsed Hux, his red hair shining in the candle light, fitting seamlessly into the surroundings. And then, her eyes fell on Ben, standing tall beside him, his head inclined toward the priest, who was going over something with him. Almost as though her eyes had drawn him, he turned to see her, and she turned away quickly, feeling a blush staining her cheeks at being caught staring, but, she couldn’t blame herself. He was a sight to be stared at in morning dress.

Like Hux he was wearing a three-piece suit, so perfectly fitted to his tall form, it had to have been expertly tailored. A very dark greyish brown colour, his cravat, pocket square and waistcoat were crimson, while Hux’s was forest green. Rey self-consciously checked the ribbons of her deep green dress, a halter top that wrapped completely around her throat, leaving a significant portion of her back bare, while completely covering her chest. Her arms were bare, and the gown was full length, and full, flowing around her as she walked. It was beautiful and she felt special in it. Her hair was caught up in an intricate style, with golden laurel leaves woven through.

“She’s here” Jessika whispered softly, and they waited to see Catherine slipping into the church, her father helping her. They helped her change her shoes, as soft music from a string quartet floated out to them. Rey busied herself arranging her train, and making sure everything was lying properly.

“Ready?” one of the ushers asked, and Catherine nodded confidently.

“Are you? Really ready?” Rose was asking, clapping both Catherine’s hands tightly. She nodded again.

“More than ready” she said.

“Let’s do this thing then – that cake I saw earlier is not going to eat itself” Rey quipped, getting into position behind Jessika. The music faded slowly, and a bridal march began, a beautiful non-classic rendition, but similar enough that everyone stood, turning with expectation toward the back. The ceremony of the whole thing caused a rush of goose bumps to sweep over Rey’s arms.

“Last one thereconstitutes… a bride” Rose whispered, before straightening up and starting her walk.

She walked down the aisle, and Rey saw when she passed Finn, sitting on the end of a pew, smile at her with a loving expression. Jessika went next, walking confidently out, past a hundred people as though it were easy.

“Relax, Rey – you’ll be great” Catherine murmured beside her, and Rey realised how tight her shoulders had gotten.

“I should be saying that to you” Rey said.

“I’m fine” Catherine reassured her.

“Of course you are, you have a person who loves you waiting for you at the end of this - the longest aisle ever” Rey joked.

“So do you” Catherine said, and suddenly the usher was motioning Rey forward, and she was walking. She felt people’s eyes on her, and wished she had something to hide behind for a moment,
until she got the hang of the pace, and started to close in on the alter.

She raised her eyes then, and met Ben’s gaze, warm, dark and full of love. He was smiling too, a real, jaw cracking grin, totally inappropriate for someone else’s wedding, she was sure, but the sight of it made her own face relax and she took a deep inhale, finally reaching her destination, and turning slightly to wait for Catherine.

The ceremony was a blur, trying to remember her part, and catching Ben’s eye now and again, when she was brave enough to look at him. She always found his eyes already trained on her.

She stepped forward when she was supposed to, took the bouquet on time, and was perfectly caught in the love that was pouring between the two people pledging themselves to each other until the end. She saw Hux’s hand tremble, as he reached for Catherine’s, and she saw her friend, steadfast and calm, reach out and grab hold of him, stilling her fingers with hers, until he had slipped on the ring. The look in his eyes made Rey cry a little more. That was what love looked like, she thought in that moment. Two people, perfect in their imperfections, filling in the tiny little gaps and shortcomings, fears and weaknesses in each other. United against the world, from that day forth.

And then, they were leaving. She was arranging Catherine’s dress and they were walking down the aisle, music swelling all around. Outside, people were arranged in a group around the mouth of the chapel, and flower petals flew in the air as they walked out. Rey struggled to see for a moment, the bright light of the snow in her teary eyes, and the flying foliage conspiring against her, and then, a strong arm gripped hers.

“I’ve got you” Ben murmured into her hair as he supported her weight. She leaned against him instinctively, sagging with relief more profound than she had realised.

He was there. He’d come back.

Rey went back inside to change her shoes and put on the heavy jacket. It proved a little tricky on the wet floor with a full skirted gown on. Ben knelt smoothly and she placed her hands on his shoulders, as he efficiently lifted her dress and pulled one delicate shoe off, rolling a polka dot welly sock up her leg with a smirk, closely followed by her boot, and then did the other foot.

“Well, Cinderella, I hope you are ready to brave the cold, I doubt Catherine will want that jacket in her pictures” he warned, standing up and pulling her close in beside him.

“Did you enjoy the ceremony?” he asked and Rey nodded, her eyes still misty with the tears she had shed. He seemed enthralled by them

“Stop – you’re thinking I’m being overly sentimental” she said.

“No, I wasn’t” he said a little gruffly, before the wedding photographer was ushering them outside.

They managed half an hour of pictures, until hands were blue and breaths choked by the cold forced them inside.

“Here” Ben whispered, and passed her a smooth, leather bound hip flask from his jacket pocket. She opened it, and took a nip, just cold enough to risk the terrible, strong flavour of the whiskey inside.

“What’s this for?”

“I’m best man, I have to be prepared for all eventualities” he said, wrapping both Rey’s hands in
his and chaffing them lightly to bring some warmth. She felt so cold she thought her teeth would chatter.

She smiled, but her response was shot down by a violent shiver.

Finally, when her attention had reduced down to just standing like an icicle and not crying, they were going inside.

The warmth of the hotel, with several open fires blazing made the air feel burning hot after the cold outside.

The bridesmaids went with Catherine, to help her pin up her dress and touch up her make up. She was swept away from Ben in a flurry of wedding organisers and guests departing for the dining room.

She next saw him when she approached her assigned seat at the head table, and saw they were next to each other, and next to Catherine.

He pulled out her chair as she rounded the lavishly decorated table, and sat down. They hadn't spoken about the morning, and Rey bit her lip thinking of how they wouldn't be able to avoid it now. There was a desperate feeling growing inside her, a sort of panic and fear that was growing and growing in her chest.

“What’s wrong?” Ben asked, as always, attuned to her mood.

“Hungry”

“Consistency, thy name is woman” he murmured, casually lacing his fingers through hers on the table, and lifting it to his mouth, pressing a kiss on the back of her hand.

Catherine turned to speak to her, and she became engrossed in conversation with her, her hand burning, still clutched in Ben’s.

Dinner came and went, and Rey had endured enough small talk she thought she might scream. They were in the lull between eating and the speeches, and took her chance to start and expel the poison she had felt brewing in her chest since the morning.

“I heard all about your little breakfast tete a tete with Bazine, whoever she is… plus your lovely view of high school relationships, and childhood sweethearts.” Rey said, taking a long pull of prosecco.

“If you’re upset, I can’t imagine she relayed my opinions faithfully” he murmured.

“Well?” she said after a long moment in which Ben did not rush to explain.

“I said that I think that in high school, people might be together because its convenient, there’s limited choice. By dating when you’re an adult and having the whole world to meet and fall in love with, it makes it more genuine to pick someone, and choose them, above all others” he said.

“So Finn are Rose aren’t really in love, they just got used to having limited options?” she asked.

“There are always exceptions, and those two are definitely one of them”

“And us?” she said, glancing at him.

“Rey, we never dated in high school, we weren’t childhood sweethearts… I’m pretty sure I have
never been anyone’s sweetheart… I lack the apparatus for it.”

“You can say that again” Rey all but snorted. Ben shifted closer and looked at her meaningfully.

“We’ve had the world to choose from, any type of person you want, every option available to you“

“And you’ve certainly taken up that challenge, the try all types challenge” Rey could resist saying, fighting to maintain a bored expression, even knowing that Ben’s eyes bore past all defences. He seemed at a loss for words for a moment, and Rey felt compelled to say something else hurtful, something to provoke him, and had no idea why.

“Again, choosing each other, out of infinite possibilities is more meaningful that choosing each other from limited options, isn’t it? That’s all I said and I wasn’t talking about us, or Finn and Rose, or anyone we know. In fact, she brought it up, rather pointedly. We are talking about a conversation that lasted less than 5 minutes.”

“Are we fighting?” he suddenly asked, his beautiful eyes clouded with unhappiness, and she hated the expression instantly. She shook her head, trying to pry her shoulders away from her ears. Her dangerous mood had little to do with Bazine.

“So… that’s where you were this morning… breakfast was more important that waking up with me?” she said, hating her jealously, but unable to help herself. The fact that their deadline, the end of the wedding was rapidly approaching was enough to send her spiralling into anxiety.

“Hux called me in the morning, he was having an issue, I had to help him out. I went by the breakfast hall afterward and picked up breakfast, for both of us. I met Bazine on the way out, and for some reason, she started questioning me about my relationship status.”

“What did you say?”

“What should I have said?”

“I don’t know! I’m just curious what you did say. I can just ask her…” Rey warned tightly.

“I told her I was involved.”

“Involved?”

“I don’t really care for discussing my private relationships with strangers.” He said. Rey stared at the waiters passing out plates, and everyone talking on their tables.

“What was Hux’s problem? It wasn’t cold feet, was it?”

“No, more a crisis of confidence” Ben said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that just because Catherine has chosen him, it doesn’t mean he believes he deserves her.” He said shortly, and she got the impression that he wasn’t going to say more on the subject, and so nodded.

“It was pretty disappointing to come back to the room and find you gone… two plates of hot food and the purest intentions to remove every article of clothing and do everything we had planned to do last night” he said, and she looked over to see him staring at her with those dark, hungry eyes.

“Well, it was pretty disappointing to wake up alone… more than disappointing” Rey admitted,
before sighing, raising a hand to her temple to massage the tight muscles there.

“I apologise, nothing short of the groom losing his confidence could have persuaded me to leave you there”

“Maybe it was for the best” even as Rey said the words, she hated them, hated the way they tasted in her mouth, and the cowardly way they fell into the air between them, like little blocks, re-building the first level of the wall that had existed between them for years.

Ben scowled, a deep, and line appearing between his eyes on his strong forehead, his bright eyes dimming a little.

“I mean, it would probably have just made everything harder, when we go back to real life” she continued, knowing she was digging a hole, in both their chests and unsure why she was doing it.

“Rey-“ he started, and stopped as a clinking sound came, signalling the start of the speeches.

Catherine’s father stood up, and the time for talking passed.

Rey stood by the edge of the dance floor, watching Catherine and Hux dance their first dance.

*She makes me smile*
She thinks the way I think
That girl makes me wanna be better

Catherine threw her head back and laughed at something her husband said, and they shared a secret smile, a world to themselves, and Rey felt bone-jarringly jealous for a moment, as she saw Ben skirting around the end of the floor, reaching her side, and holding a hand out to her. They were to join the dance, and she let him lead her out onto the dimly lit dancefloor, her heart pounding.

*Oh you trade all the money in the world*
Just to see this girl's smile
All the while, she'll make you feel so much better

He pulled her in close, and they slipped effortlessly into the romantic melody.

“Penny for your thoughts, Rey” Ben said, his face above hers, and she looked out over the other dancing guests, hiding her expression.

“I’m just thinking about tomorrow” she said. They twirled a little, Ben’s hand on her back guiding her.

“What about it?”
“What happens?” she asked.

“What do you want to happen? I know what I want” he said. She swallowed hard.

“What?”

“You. I just want you” he said, and Rey squeezed her eyes shut at those words. They ripped at all her defences, battered her carefully shored walls. The walls she had built to keep herself safe.

“You?” he asked after a long moment.

And you’ll either love me love me
Or you hate me
But I can see you've got no time
For the in-between

“I don’t know” she whispered, and felt his arms tense a little, but he didn’t stop.

They danced on under the soft lights, unspeaking, until the song finished.

The reception dragged on, the guests dancing, cake was cut, everyone was in high spirits, except Rey, who felt as though she were under the clock in some kind pressure test.

She felt strangely disconnected from everything going on around her, totally and selfishly focused on Ben, and the unresolved things between them.

She would have been alright, she thought dully, if he had just left her alone. If she hadn’t let even the tiniest thought of having it all, enter her mind. But it had, and he had pressed her into it, and how, that tiny ember of hope had caught flame inside her, and was now raging. It brought all her fears to the surface and by the time Ben pulled her aside into an unused room, it was almost shaking her with its intensity. Ben had been the perfect best man, talking to all the families, making sure there were no hiccups in the evening, but the rest of the time, he had watched her with a quiet intensity that made her face burn, even as she did her best to avoid him.

“We can’t skip out” she protested, as the quietness of the room fell over them. A low lamp was lit in the corner, and she looked around to see wedding presents neatly stacked on tables. Ben let out a long sigh, his back pressing against the door they had just come through, and ran a distracted hand through his hair, a gesture so familiar it hurt.
“It’s fine. We are almost done out there, everything is taken care of. There’s nowhere left to run to be rid of me” he said tiredly. Rey scoffed, crossing her arms.

“I’m not running, I was busy”

“You were avoiding me, and I thought that after last night, we were passed that”

“What, last night when I fell over and then was put to bed in a drunken stupor? I don’t see how that changes much” she muttered, and held out a hand to still Ben, as he moved off the door and approached her with purpose.

“Stop – don’t. We can’t be long, and we can’t talk like this… too close – I can’t think clearly” she said, her voice almost desperate. Ben stopped, a frown marring his handsome features. He looked bewildered by her words, and Rey could understand it, she wasn’t making much sense to herself either.

“Rey, I don’t understand. What are you so afraid of?” he asked, and at the question, her nerve snapped. How he could ask her that, after everything they had been through, after the years it took to piece herself back into a rough semblance of a person again.

“What am I afraid off? I’m afraid of you!” she all but shouted, freezing Ben in place. He looked shocked, and terribly wounded for a moment.

“And I’m afraid of me too. I’m afraid of what we do to each other, what we’ve done… I’m afraid like a love like ours can’t be survived a second time. We were lucky to escape unscathed” she said, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Are you unscathed? Because you don’t seem so to me. I know I am not. Losing you has left a hole inside me that burns” he said, roughly tearing at his chest, over his heart, leaving his shirt askew. She realised in that moment that Ben was just as worked up as she was, just as afraid, but better at hiding it.

“Rey – just let go – the past, we have to let it all go… it can’t hurt us anymore. Please, stop being afraid. Being afraid will cost us everything we could be together, the future we could have” he said, stepping toward her.

“I know you are afraid and yes, it is terrifying, and amazing and everything in between. I can’t promise to be perfect, and to never annoy you, or piss you off. And yes, we are going to fight-“ he said, coming to stand before her, his voice dropping low as he reached around her waist and pulled her close to him.

“And you are going to be angry at me and curse me to hell and I’ll do the same”

“You’re really selling this” she whispered, locked in the passionate look in his eyes. His voice lowered even more.

“But we will also make up, and remember all the reasons why we are together, and all the reason we don’t ever want to be apart. We will work and be tired, fall out about washing the dishes, and which place to order dinner from, and one day, whose turn it is to get up in the night with our kids-if you ever want to walk that road with me again. And if you don’t, then I will never speak of it again. I want whatever you want.“

“Ben” Rey whispered, jolted by his sincerity.

“The point is I want to do all those things with you. I want to wake up with you every morning, and
have your face be the last thing I see at night. I want to fight and laugh with you, shout and cry and
love” he trailed off, his deep voice rough with emotion, and Rey felt a long tear escape from her
eye.

“I want to be with you Rey, today, tomorrow and every day. I’m tired of being without you. I am
so tired~“ he broke off, and she felt her stomach drop as someone cleared their throat nearby. She
turned, the spell that had fallen over them broken in an instant. Finn was standing awkwardly in the
doorway.

“They are leaving” Finn said quietly, his eyes averted, as he slipped out the room. Rey’s fingers
were still held in Ben’s death grip, and she turned back to him, her expression making his face
close.

“Ben – we have to go out there. This isn’t a good time” he stared at her a moment longer, as though
willing time to go back to a few minutes before, and then let her hands slowly drop.

“Oh, alright” he breathed, turning from her and shoving a hand through his hair. She lingered there,
unsure what to do. Her thoughts were a panicked, swirling mess in her head.

Clapping came from outside the room, and she looked around, worried she was letting down
Catherine, but leaving Ben and this conversation was the last thing she wanted.

“Go – I’m right behind you” Ben said, sounding more composed. Still she hesitated.

“Rey – go. I’m not going to break” he said, and the normalcy of his tone shook her out her inner
reverie. She watched him walk to the window, and stare out, as she slipped out the room, and into
the throng in the hall, as the bride and groom, changed into their going away outfits, made their
way down the aisle of people. They stopped for pictures, as Rey held Catherine’s bags, and threw
flower petals, forcing a smile to her face. She was there, and her smile was perfect, but it was not
the happy scene of a newlywed couple she saw before her, it was the whiteness of Ben’s knuckles,
as he gripped the window frame, his face a resigned mask.

After the left, the parents closed in, and Rey spent time making sure Catherine’s mother was
settled, and helping her grandmother back to her room. Rose and Finn had disappeared somewhere,
and she couldn’t find Ben anywhere.

She was exhausted, and sad, elated but wrung out. The whole week catching up to her. She helped
where needed, and then, after the longest day she could remember, climbed the stairs to Ben’s
room. She stood outside, tired but decided.

If she could have a life with Ben, she couldn’t let fear stand in her way.

She knocked, and waited. She heard the drift of voices coming down the hall, and looked along to
see Catherine’s father and mother approaching.

“Off to bed, Rey? You must be tired, what a night” Catherine’s father was saying.

“I am, I was stopping by to speak to Ben first” she explained. Catherine’s parents exchanged a
look, that made Rey stomach drop.

“But Ben has left, my dear... He had to go back to the city.” She thanked them, barely registering
the words she must have said, as she staggered along the hall to ward her room, moving on
autopilot.

Ben was gone.
Chapter End Notes

The end is nigh, my dears... updated chapter count above... End to go up asap.

Thank you all for your comments and staying with me through this story. It's my first for this fandom and everyone is so lovely.

I do hope I can convince you to try out my new, multi-chapter dark regency story - The Beast Within.

The first few chaps of that are ready to go up very soon, and I will link from my tumblr, immortalpen.
I held on as tightly as you held onto me

Chapter Notes

To build a home - The Cinematic Orchestra, Patrick Watson

There is a house built out of stone

Wooden floors, walls and window sills

Tables and chairs worn by all of the dust

This is a place where I don't feel alone

This is a place where I feel at home

'Cause, I built a home

For you

For me

The Cinematic Orchestra, Patrick Watson

That night was not her finest. She stared at her phone, and was too afraid to call Ben.

Instead she waited.

She waited for him to call, jumping at every noise, checking the screen endlessly.

She stared at herself in the mirror as she cleaned off her makeup, and for a long time after.

She saw a woman who had scars that were invisible to all but her, and maybe one other person.
Someone who had let her fear take her over. What else had her relationship with Poe been? If not a desperate attempt to see if she could be normal, be someone who could love easily and deeply, without it costing her everything.

Why hadn’t she spoken to Ben since she had last seen him in Tuscany, when he had whispered that their story would never be over, that there would always be a next time for them.

Why hadn’t she gone to work for the foundation, Leia’s life’s work.

Why had she hidden herself away?

Why had she pushed him away, made him doubt her heart?

Because, the truth she had always known, was that there was no one like Ben, for her. Try as she might, wish as she would and as much as it scared her, it was undeniable. Her mother had taught her uncertainty and loneliness and her childhood had taught her fear. She had always thought herself so brave, in that secret way, you might feel but would never admit to anyone.

But she wasn’t, in the end.

She watched the snow fall past the window of her room, felt a silence, deep and profound, enter her bones.

In that quiet dark, she saw her fear made small by a new terror – that is was too late. That she had failed them both. In the end, when she faced the prospect of the years ahead without the possibility of Ben, it hurt in a way she didn’t know she could hurt.

She watched the snow fall, feeling the cold flakes fall on her brusied heart, freezing it solid.

He didn’t call.

The next morning, she dragged herself down to the car, seeing Rose waiting for her. She put her cases in the trunk, and then, settled back in the chair.

“Rey, are you alright?” Rose asked tentatively. Rey thought about it a long moment, and then shook her head.

“I don’t think I am” she murmured, squinting her eyes out over the blazing sun, already melting the snow on the ground, the glorious foliage reappearing. Rose nodded, and turned her attention to driving. They pulled around the front of the hotel, and down the winding drive, as Rey turned her face to the window, her mind empty and still.

“Nice soulmate string” Rose said, suddenly bringing Rey’s attention to the red ribbon, that for
some reason, she had slipped into her pocket this morning, as she had left her room, and the beautiful house. The place where she had come so close to having everything she wanted, but was too scared to try for. She stared at it, as she mindlessly slipped it through her fingers, holding on to the part of him that lingered.

“Soulmate string?”

“Yeah! The red string of fate, tied around the little finger, to another person, means that no matter the time or place, those two people are bound together, fated to be – soulmates, it can’t be broken, no matter how tangled or damaged it gets, or so the story goes” Rose continued, as she spun around the last curve of the country road and toward the huge gates at the bottom.

“Damn!” Rose suddenly exclaimed.

“Geez! Nice driving, ass hat” Rose muttered angrily, and pulled sharply to a stop.

“Erm, Rey…” she said after a moment, and Rey turned from her muted study of the red string on her finger. She saw a black sports car stopped on the other side of the drive. A very familiar car.

Rose reached a hand out, and squeezing Rey’s as she simply stared at the car, the door of which was opening, and then, Ben was there, approaching the car at quite a pace.

“Rey?” Rose asked again, as she struggled to accept what she was seeing. Her car door opened, and Ben was squatting down, and looking at her, his dark eyes running over her.

“You’re leaving?” he asked, slightly breathless. Rose waited for Rey to answer, and when it became clear she wasn’t going to, she nodded.

“I’ll take Rey, if she wants… if she’ll let me” Ben said quickly, and again, searched her face. Rey looked at him in stunned silence, before nodding. He moved to the back for her bags as Rose popped the trunk.

“Are you sure?” Rose asked, and Rey nodded.

“You don’t mind? You won’t have company” Rey finally said, her words cracking through the ice in her chest.

“No offence but you didn’t seem like you were going to be the best road trip buddy today… it’s cool! I can listen to my books on tape” Rose said with a laugh, at Rey’s frown.

“Just concentrate on the driving, pull in if you get tired.”

“Yes, mom. Now go – be brave, and take what you want, Rey. You deserve to be happy”

Ben reversed hastily and soon, they were back on the road, heading South. She couldn’t quite believe that he was here, that he came back. She thought she might be in shock, and couldn’t quite tear her eyes away from the side of his face.

"You're here" she murmured to herself, too quiet for Ben to hear. Again and again, over and over.
Before long, the lull of the car, and the sheer relief of seeing his welcome face, brought the previous sleepless night back to her, and she found her eyes growing heavy.

“Sleep, sweetheart, I’ll be here when you wake up” Ben said quietly, squeezing her knee briefly, and she slipped away.

She awoke with a start, sitting up suddenly, a cry on her lips, his name, dreaming that he had gone. The car was stopped, and she struggled to see where they were. The driver’s seat was empty, and a moment of panic was quickly calmed as she saw him outside, sitting on a tree stump. He had pulled in at the parking lot in the woods, it seemed, taking in the tall, changing trees on either side of the car, interspersed with deep green pines. The little sports car was nestled in one of two spots, and there was something familiar about the place, but, in her sleepy state, she couldn’t quite grasp the tendrils of memory.

She opened the door, and Ben looked up immediately, the pensive look on his face melting away as she approached him.

“Cold?” he asked, looking over her.

“A little” she admitted, and looked pointedly around them.

“I was getting tired, I thought I should pull in… I saw the sign and I couldn’t resist” he said, his full mouth quirking up in the ghost of a lopsided smile, as he rose, and pulled a warm coat from the car, and brought it to her. He put it over her shoulders, and she buried her face into the collar, the smell of Ben overwhelming her for a moment.

“What sign?” she asked. He raised a surprised eyebrow at her.

“Fancy a walk? It might jog your memory” was all he said, locking the car, and starting for a trail, heading into the woods. She followed.

As they walked down needle carpeted paths, the cathedral of pines, still green and beautiful in the snow above them, she felt a smile start deep down in her soul. She glanced at him, her face showing her excitement. These woods were home. He had brought her home. He grinned back.

“I thought you would recognise it” he murmured, taking her hand to help her over a fallen stump. As she came to jump down, he stepped closer, and brushed a soft kiss against her lips. She almost slipped with surprise.

She found her feet, and trailed after him a little further, as his long gait increased, seeming in a hurry to reach somewhere.

“Ben – wait. We should talk” she said, her emotions a mess. He had turned her inside out the previous night, and now, was here, sweeping in and acting like everything was normal.

“What happened last night?” she asked, tugging him to a stop when he was slow to answer. He
turned, his eyes evading hers as he shrugged.

“T had to go back to the city for something” he said evasively.

“I wasn’t sure you’d notice” he said, and the words hit Rey hard, directly to her heart, so hard she almost staggered away. And with them the terrible cold that had paralysed her starting to melt, bringing, long, hot tears in their wake.

“How could you say that? How could you even think it for a second?” she gasped out, as Ben watched her, clearly shocked at the torrent of emotions that had been hiding just under the surface.

“Were you punishing me for not being better? More enthusiastic? Less afraid?” she continued, as he looked wretched at her accusation. He shook his head.

“Of course not, I’d never-“

“You left… you just left” she said, her tears making her skin sting, her mouth frozen in a mewl of sadness. She was not a pretty crier, and these were not pretty tears. They were guttural and real, and it was all she could do to force words out at the same time.

“I didn’t leave – I mean, I did, but I was coming back. Of course I was coming back.” he said, stepping closer to her, stilling as she held out a hand to stay him. He seemed to sway there, fighting against his urge to move closer, determined to respect her wishes.

“Rey – don’t cry, please, not because of me. I’m sorry, I thought you’d be busy with the wedding clean-up, and maybe even a little relieved to have me out your hair”

“How can you say that? How could you say those things to me, those, earth moving, heart shattering things, and then just leave!!” she cried, her voice rising and ugly at the end. He dropped his head, clenching his fists tightly to his side.

“I apologise-“

“Not accepted, and stop fucking apologising!!” she cried, though it came out as more of a snarl.

“You say all these things, and you are here, and you look at me like – like I hung the stars… and you treat me like I’m made of glass. It had to be my choice, all of it. My responsibility. It’s not fair. So, when it all goes wrong again, you can walk away and pretend I brought it on myself?” she said, more tears finding release.

“Why are you so insistent it will go wrong again? That we can’t last? Why can’t you believe in us?? Why can’t you believe in me?” he asked, his voice little more than a murmur.

“You don’t believe in me either, that’s why you need me to make the choice, to save you from feeling guilty later” she sighed, the last of her nervous energy leaving her, suddenly finding her arms caught by his strong hands, and then, they were slowly back toward a tree, it’s base wide and sturdy, perfect branches for climbing, her memory twitching as her back softly met the wall, and she gratefully let it share her weight.

“I don’t believe in you? How can you say that to me, when all I have done for the past five years is wait for you… when all I have done for the last 15 is love you” he said quietly, and her heart skipped in her chest.

“I will wait 5 more, and 5 again, if that’s what it takes to make you believe I’ve changed, that I’ve become someone – worthy” he breathed.
“And what if I am not worthy? You look at me like I’m some goddess to be worshiped, something you fixed as your idol. I’m just myself, the same Rey I’ve always been, and once you realise that, that all this hard work and waiting was just for… that… for me – you’ll leave” she said finally.

“You’ll leave and it’ll be all my fault, for not being able to keep you.” Her tone was desolate, matching the fear in her eyes. Fear and relief crowding in on her, making it hard to breath.

Ben was still in front of her, and she finally grew brave enough to look up and see his face, full of compassion.

“Don’t feel sorry for me” she warned in a broken voice.

“Don’t pity me, just because now I’m the only broken one… the one who is failing us” she whispered.

He didn’t speak, simply watched her, and then, pulled her into his chest, his heart beat against her ear comforting her always. A no-arguments, all-encompassing hug. He rubbed large circles on her back.

“You think you’re different from everyone else, because you’re afraid. Everyone is afraid Rey, me most of all, and I am far from fixed. There is no fixed, there is only good days and bad days. I don’t want or expect you to be anything other than yourself, on both those types of days and I hope you feel the same.”

“And I wasn’t leaving you, and I don’t see us breaking up. I don’t see myself being parted from you again. Whatever comes up, whatever we fight about, we will deal with it together. I left because I realised that you needed more from me, than just words to show you how very serious I am” he pulled back, and she grasped him tighter to her.

He waited a beat, until pulling away again. He took a step back, his hands going to his jacket pocket, and then, to her amazement, he was pulling out a little square box with scrolling gold lettering on it.

“I could have bought something in town, but it should be this ring. It was my grandmother’s” he was saying, as he pulled open the box, and carefully pulled the delicate engagement ring from its velvet bed, the diamonds sparkling in the light.

“I might have left, but I came back. I will always come back for you.” He said solemnly, and then, he was dropping to his knees before her, a slow controlled movement, head coming level with her stomach, his hazel eyes shining clear and almost gold. There was something sacred about the movement, a surrender, a plea, a submission.

“And I might have waited for you, but you waited for me first. You waited for me all along.” He said, holding a hand out to her, his long fingers trembling slightly as he waited there.

“And I’m here now, I am finally here, and I won’t go again, not unless you want me to… maybe not even then” his mouth quirked in the slightest of a smirk, and Rey simply stared, unable to process his intention.

“Well? What do you say?” he asked, in the deep silence between them, as the surroundings fell into place for Rey.

Not only was this their forest, where they met, where she had loved him from the start. It was the very tree she had spied on him from, recognisable from its sheer size, and the clearing around it. She could see smoke rising from the caretaker’s cottage close by. And she knew it was no random
stop on the road because he was tired. Ben had driven all night to get his grandmother’s engagement ring, and come back to her, then he had brought her back to where it all started, where that red string of fate first bloomed into existence, between two lonely children, wrapping around them and binding them forever.

A partner against the dark, a companion of the soul.

“Rey?” Ben said quietly, his dark eyes burning with intensity, and Rey’s tear stained face finally melted into a smile.

Rey reached back into her pocket and pulled the red ribbon from her pocket, and held it out to him, looping one end around her finger.

He smiled them, with all the pride of a man being claimed by the woman he loved.

The red band pulled taut between them.

“Red string of fate?” he asked lightly.

“The two people connected by the red thread of fate are destined lovers, regardless of place, time, or circumstances. This magical cord may stretch or tangle, but never break… it doesn’t just mean connected… it means-” she trailed off,

“Soulmates. I know” he said, his smile growing even wider, as he used the string to pull her into his arms, and slid the ring onto her finger. They both stared at it.

“Do you like it?”

“Of course, I do”

“Good, I want you to have everything you want, and I want to be the one to give it to you” he said, his voice a deep resonant rumble in his chest, as he pulled her to him, pressing his head into her stomach, and she wrapped her arms around it, cradling it to her.

“If I have you, I have everything I want” Rey admitted as he raised his head and looked up at her.

“You don’t know what it does to me, to hear you say you want me” he said, his voice was low, vulnerable. She smiled and ran her fingers through the thick waves of his hair.

“I’ve always wanted you, you taught me what it was – to want” Rey confessed, and he tightened his arms around her. She suddenly realised that it was relief that eased Ben’s features. It seemed too impossible that he might not know her heart, that he might be unsure that she had loved him always, when it was so clear and painfully obvious to her.

“I’ll never stop wanting you. Needing you. I’ve always been yours, really, underneath it all. No matter what” She said quietly, and he leaned forward, and captured the end of the words with a hungry kiss.

“And I’ve belonged to you, since you saved me”

“You saved you, Ben”

“I know that’s what I am supposed to say, supposed to feel but it isn’t true. It was you.”

“You taught me what it was to live, you made me want to, even in my darkest times. I wanted to survive, so that one day, maybe – I could have you” he said. She pulled him into another embrace,
her face finding the crook of his neck and shoulder, her spot.

“Well, now you’re stuck with me – till the very end” she said softly against the skin there.

"That’s not a promise to make lightly, kid” he said gruffly, and she sighed.

"I know" she said, her face splitting with the smile only he inspired.

“So... promise?” he asked softly, and she laughed, grabbing his pinkie finger, bound to hers with the ribbon.

“Promise.”
Hello gentle readers, a belated Christmas present for all my loyal readers.

Three parts in total - hope you enjoy seeing how our pair of star crossed lovers end up))

Just little snippets of the important times, as I would be too tempted to write way too much if not!

6 months later

The low, lazy sun of a late Tuscan summer warmed Rey’s chilled hands, as she stood at the window of the villa, looking out across the hills, and marveling at that particular kind of light that suffused the air here. It danced on the leaves, it suffused the very earth of the place. It was magic, pure and simple.

And it was all hers. She looked down again at the letter in her hand, the deed to this very villa, and her name, as the owner.

“It’s a wedding present” he said from the door. She turned, clutching the silk ends of her robe together, before remembering that she wasn’t in her dress yet. It wasn’t bad luck if she wasn’t in her dress yet. He was leaning against the door, hands in his dress trousers, his long hair waving around his jaw, the sight was still enough to stop her heart.

“Some present… a little much, some might say” she teased, as he closed in. He was wearing a white dress shirt, impeccably stiff and pristine, and it was early enough he hadn’t even rolled the sleeves to his elbows yet, as he usually did. She suddenly longed for that moment, later, when they were alone, him with his sleeves rolled, her dress discarded, shoes kicked off, and nothing but the sweet forever to look forward to.

“You do know there’s a date on it” she said, turning again to the view beyond the window, feeling a deep contentment settle in her bones. A feeling of home. He reached her, and wrapped his arms around her from behind, settling his face into the nook of her shoulder.

“Hard to hide it” was all he said, as she mulled over it.

It meant so much more than he made it seem, that scribbled date 4 long years ago. That he had believed in her, believed in them, when it had seemed like all was lost. He never gave up on the idea that they were destined.

“And if we had never ended up here together?”

“Then… I would know that you always had a place of your own, a place you loved. That would have been enough” he said quietly, and she believed him.
“I’m to tell you that the musicians are held up… could push the time back by an hour or so” Rey laughed at his unsurprised tone.

“It wouldn’t be Italy if everyone was on time” she agreed.

“Catherine is stressing about it”

“It’ll talk to her” Rey said. She leaned back and pulled his arms around her waist. His large hands instantly went to her lower belly, his new favourite place in her body, and cupped the infinestimal mound there.

“You are remarkably relaxed for a woman on the verge of matrimony.”

“When in Rome… I quite like the Italian way… it’ll happen when it happens” she sighed, as Ben brushed his thumbs over abdomen. Slowly he turned her around, and lowered himself to his knees, like a knight bowing before his queen, he carefully parted her robe, and ran his hands over the slightly distended curve.

“And it will happen – today… and forever more… you’re mine, kid. Both of you” he murmured as he pressed his lips to her skin, kissing that sacred place where their secret resided.

“Anyway, I can think of a most excellent use of the extra time” he smirked, his lips curling against her flesh, as his mouth moved lower, and her hands curled into his hair.

_Six months after that_

Ben Solo had worked to be more patient for many years. He had practised meditation, and he had sought feelings of calm and centeredness through his practise of martial arts. He now recognised the truth. In times of true stress, he had absolutely no control over his anxiety.

The door to the private bathroom opened, and Rey came out. Ben couldn’t stop himself from reaching her side as quickly as possible.

“Mr Solo, we have it under control” a nurse told him firmly, pushing him aside with her hip. Ben watched forlornly as Rey was guided back to the bed, her slim body shaking with exhaustion and pain. Her belly, distended and swollen protruded hugely before her, and he didn’t know how she could walk around with such a burden, as effortlessly as she had.

“Did the shower help the contractions?” he asked, as Rey climbed back on the bed.

“A little…” she panted.
“Shouldn’t you stay in there longer?” he asked, watching a nurse checking the mobile heart monitor they had attached to his wife.

“Mother’s heart rate is rising a little too fast, and baby’s is slowing a little” the nurse said, turning fully to him, as the midwife behind approached the phone mounted on the wall. Ben felt his own heart stop completely for a moment. His hands were trembling as he looked again to Rey, her hair plastered over her forehead, veins popping out, and her eyes glazed with pain. He had never felt so powerless.

“What does it mean?” he asked urgently.

“It means it’s time to deliver this baby. We will call the consultants for an exam, and they will discuss options with you. Everything is going to be alright, Mr Solo. Women have children everyday” the nurse said, turning to talk on the phone.

Ben went to Rey’s side, his heart hammering so hard he was sure that he might have his own heart attack any moment. He crouched beside the bed, finding his mouth was moving, without hardly realising what he was saying.

“They’re calling in consultants, which is a good thing, right? I mean, more heads are better than one.. Maybe I should call someone… Maz might know a good-”

“Ben” Rey’s voice cut through his thoughts, and he cut his eyes to hers. She was holding out her hands for his, and he grasped her fingers. His were shaking badly, sweating and clammy, he gripped her. Her fingers were cool, and still. He suddenly became aware of how calm Rey seemed. Even through the pain and uncertainty, she sat there, beatific in her peace.

“Sweetheart, calm down. You have to calm down.” She murmured. In her eyes then he felt as though he saw something ancient and wise, a strength passed down from mother to daughter, and daughter to mother again and again, from time unknown until ages without end.

“Help me breathe” she asked him, and he sat beside her, forcing air into his lungs, a painful exercise at first, and then, growing easier. His eyes locked onto hers, her hands gripped him, as fresh sweat popped up on her brow.

“Ben, call the nurse… something is happening. Something different” she said quietly, and he called out immediately, his naturally loud voice carrying easily across the room. The midwife and nurse appeared, hovering down below where Rey’s knees were spread, talking between themselves.

“Mrs Solo, it seems she’s coming on her own after all. She doesn’t want to wait one more moment for her birthday. Get ready to push” The nurse said, as she settled in between Rey’s legs.

“Are you ready?” she called. Rey kept her eyes on Ben, her hands braced in his, breathing in and out together, his breath guiding her back to calm, when pain stuttered the air in her lungs, and her leading him back when worry robbed him of his.

“I’m ready”