The Housekeeper's Daughter

by strawberrycupcake_huckleberrypie

Summary

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Do you want a cookie?" Holding the cookie up between them, elbow propped on the island, her question answered his.

“Yes, I want the cookie.”

He leaned forward to snatch it with his mouth, hands-free from where she held it, his eyes on hers.

“Then, yes. I want you to stay.”

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She’d been the daughter of their housekeeper since they were children, but when Rey moved back home from California after college, Ben was not prepared for how she would light up his life.
Invisible

Chapter Summary

this chapter...Rey is 11, Ben is 18.

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU to my incredible beta reader, uselessenglishmajor who to me will always be useFULenglishmajor.

Time jump four years, next chapter...
find me on tumblr

- Berry
Chapter 1

Invisible
A single two-lane road hugged the 11 miles of Long Beach Key.

Once densely populated with sprawling live oak canopies and towering king palm trees, the key was split permanently when the road was built, leaving sandy stretches along the bay and the Gulf.

Rey believed it to be the prettiest stretch of beach on the west coast of southern Florida. A processional of homes flanked every inch, Mediterranean mansions, sweet bungalows, and imposing contemporary abodes lined Long Beach Road.

Competition was fierce as it always is between friendly neighbors with money to burn, but no one could argue there was one home which surpassed them all.

The Solo estate, crown jewel of Long Beach Key, sprawled on 14.7 acres, unfurling lazily on the Gulfside nearest the private far north jetty.

There was no mistaking which home was the estate.

The ornate "S" on the iron gates which secured the grounds announced its’ owners names, the redhead security gate attendant requiring anyone who hoped to pass the threshold to do so only at the permission of the owners.

Maintenance crews, lawn teams, and personal assistants were regularly granted access to the home by Hux, but gawking tourists were routinely turned away, even if they had read about the residence and its fascinating family in any of the lifestyle, travel or architecture magazines it had been featured in.

Maz Kanata only waved at Hux through the window of her 1991 Toyota Corolla, not even unrolling it, unwilling to allow the air conditioning to escape. She paused at the iron gates for only the most essential space to open before hurrying along the winding gravel drive to the furthest curve towards the house.

Running the estate, exemplifying professional loyalty was what kept Maz running, even at her age. She still bloomed as brightly as the bougainvillea boughs that wound their way up the side of the kitchen trellis, leading to the Dutch door she entered 6 days a week, most with Rey beside her.

A widowed Mexican immigrant who had learned English once she moved to Florida at age 28 without a valid visa, she’d jumped at the offer to work on the estate when Dr. Solo had offered.

That was so many decades ago, and she had put in so many thousands of hours of work into this home, she felt a surge of pride as she pulled her daughter inside the house behind her as she walked inside.
“Alright Mija, hop up. I’ll get you some cereal before I go find the gals,” Maz suggested, pulling her daughter onto a high-backed stool at the spacious marble island.

She poured a generous portion of Count Chocula into a white porcelain bowl and added milk, handing her sleepy daughter a heavy, silver spoon.

Opening her computer at the kitchen desk, she sorted chores into lists for her staff.

Tonight, the house would be opened for an event, each of the 14,000 square feet inside sparkling and coconut-scented, elegantly appointed, flawlessly decorated and graciously hosted.

Today there was no time to waste.

All 4 foot-8 inches of Maz, glasses straightened and chin lifted, set out to locate each of her housekeeping staff to do the family and the house proud.

Today would last until well into tonight with an event looming, so she’d better get moving. The clock wasn’t going to slow down and neither must she.

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Rey watched her mother stand from her blinking computer to put hands on her hips, surveying the space before moving to the next room for assessment. Her mother rarely wore an apron at work anymore, since she had other employees who ran around wearing aprons and rubber gloves often enough, but she still wasn’t afraid to do the dirty work herself.

Rey smiled around a mouthful of chocolatey cereal as her mother kissed her temple.

“Be good, Mija,” Maz said. "See you in a bit.”

She listened to her mother’s sandals clack along the wide, glossy tiles until the echo faded as she marched into carpeted rooms, leaving Rey alone in the cavernous kitchen, her chomping suddenly sounding deafeningly loud in her own ears.

She didn’t mind the solitude, truth be told.

School wore her out with mandatory socializing and a hefty schedule of academics and extra-curriculars. She was used to being in the house with her mother while she worked.

When Rey was much smaller, maybe ages 2 through 6, she’d toddled around the house at Maz’s side, chirping at her baby dolls or scurrying around behind BB, the cat, but as she grew older she became aware of the lack of playmates her own age around. Everyone else at the estate was much older than her, so she sought refuge in any corner of the echoing house that seemed remote.
She would find herself in the library with a book, or the den with MTV muted.

If it wasn’t too hot, the second-story lanai mesmerized her as lizards crawled the stucco walls. Daydreaming and content the older she got to spend a day off of school being invisible in this beautiful house, a second almost-home, she was comforted by her own anonymity.

“Mouse!”

It rang like a bell in her head and inside the empty kitchen, his name lighting up like neon in her brain.

The stillness of the kitchen was cracked open by his presence behind her. Rey felt her heart seize, her jaw freeze mid-chew, her eyes blank out as she immediately placed the voice.

*What am I wearing? What does my ponytail look like?*

Her brain skipped to her last thoughts regarding the person to whom the voice belonged. *My diary!* she registered with panic followed by relief, remembering he hadn’t seen what she’d written the night before.

He didn’t know she was far beyond puppy love with him, and well into obsession.

Her diary was safely at her bedside back home, stacked under a social studies workbook, soccer team schedule and Tuesday’s math homework.

She resumed chewing nonchalantly, tossing a defiant eye roll towards him as Poe approached, all olive skin, black curls and sweaty 19-year-old, irreverent teenage boy of him.

“What the heck, Poe,” she demanded. "I almost choked to death.”

She elbowed him when he came close enough, knocking the basketball out from under his elbow where it had been trapped against his hip.

The ball rolled away, but he ignored it, grabbing the cereal box.

He dug inside to retrieve a handful before smashing it inelegantly into his mouth, eyes sparkling with what she knew to be pride at teasing her.

“Mmmm,” he mumbled around a mouthful.

He walked away from Rey before she’d had enough access to him, before she could land another excuse to touch him playfully again.

At the oversized refrigerator, he roughly tugged the door open hard enough she saw his arm bounce
with the effort, and chugged yellow Gatorade while Rey studied his throat as he gulped.

*How can he be this cute?*

Before she could speak again, worrying through a way to sound older than her 11 years, to appear more interesting than she knew herself to be, he strode to her cereal box again, taking another handful while glancing at the clock on the wall.

“C’mon, let’s go see what’s on the tube.”

He headed for the doorway to the living room without waiting, the basketball forgotten beneath the tufted banquette by the bay window. His Air Jordans squeaked on the polished tile floor, unaware he’d thrilled Rey by welcoming her to spend time with him.

Poe may have been completely comfortable in this home, the elder son of Leia and Han Solo, but Rey was a guest even if she was here six days of every week.

She carefully rinsed her bowl, returning the cereal box to the pantry, scooting her bar stool into place, making sure every aspect of the kitchen is returned to its usually pristine state. Her mother wouldn’t mind her tagging along with Poe through the house, pretending she was his actual friend, but she would definitely *would* mind seeing an abandoned kitchen in need of straightening.

Rey headed in the direction of the TV, calming her erratically beating heart. Pulling her ponytail tighter, biting her fingernails to give outlet to her nerves, she glided into the upstairs den silently. The thick carpet’s softness welcomed her as she scanned the room, deciding where to place herself.

Poe had already claimed one long half of the leather sectional, sprawled out generously, one arm cocked behind his head. Ankles crossed at his socks, shoes kicked aside, the remote flickered in his hand towards the TV, as Rey stood, thinking through seating options.

She wanted the event of watching TV with Poe to stretch out, take up the entire day, wanted to choose wisely. Somehow, she wanted to ensure he didn’t launch himself out of the room anytime soon. Deciding on the upholstered armchair instead of the couch, Rey plopped down satisfied she was at least blocking his only exit, even if she wasn’t actually sitting near him.

He’d have to walk within touching distance of her to leave the room now, whatever happened.

Once he was satisfied with the cartoon he’d settled on, snorting a laugh at the characters, Rey relaxed imperceptibly into her chair, letting her mind wander, enjoying the chance to be with him in shared silence.

She barely breathed.
Realizing she sat too formally, she curled into the chair sideways, her right leg swinging over the arm.

*There.*

She was giving off carelessness, now.

*That’s good. I look casual,* she decided, knowing she’d never been more hyper-aware of anything in her entire life.

Her thoughts whipped back into the room when her dangling leg came flying over the arm of her chair, shoved away by a huge body as he lumbered past her into the room.

“Mmfff, sorry,” Ben muttered, juggling a turkey sandwich and water bottle.

Kicking his own shoes off, he collapsed onto the opposite end of Poe’s couch with a mighty huff.

It was not what Rey had hoped for at all.

She’d been soaking up the shared solitude of TV time with Poe, the precious sanctity of time with him, and she was instantly annoyed at sharing the moment, the room, the same air as Poe with his younger brother.

Clearly, they’d been on the basketball court, if Ben’s sweaty mane of black hair and drenched, sleeveless t-shirt were any indicators, and obviously he was as worn out as his brother. Knees spread wide and one arm thrown over the back of the couch, he slowly made his way through his sandwich, showing no indication he was leaving the room anytime soon.

This was his house too, and she was the one who was somewhat of a guest, so no way could Rey act as irritated as she felt about his appearance, but she reserved the right to privately steam about the change in dynamics that resulted from his barging in.

Where Poe was sunny and charismatic, his younger brother Ben was thoughtful and aloof. Where Poe was bronzed and compact, Ben was pale and towering. Where Poe was all grins and banter, Ben was the occasional smirk and careful kidding.

Rey was much more comfortable with Poe, though he was older than Ben by a year, and she supposed it had something to do with the fact she and Poe were both adopted. Having both suffered that bottomless loss of their first families, she related to Poe in a way she doubted Ben could have understood.

Having been born to Han and Leia a year before Poe even entered their home at age 2, it made sense to Rey she felt more kinship with Poe.
Ben was kind, but remained so distant around Rey, she couldn’t ever get a good read on him. She didn’t know how to act around him exactly, but with Poe she could just as easily chicken fight on his shoulders in his pool as she could complain to him about her soccer coach.

She wasn’t very sure Ben even knew her name, though she’d been coming to his house since she was a baby.

Poe, on the other hand…

“Mouse, throw me that pillow,” Poe commanded from his reclined position on the couch, unbothered to say please or even look her direction.

“Ugh.”

She chucked a tasseled pillow at his head, watching as he caught it with a grin, propping his head with it easily.

“Why are you such a boss?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Why are you such a brat?”

Before she could retaliate and up the ante, the doorbell rang, sending a shock down Rey’s back. The next moment, Maz’s head popped around the doorframe.

“Mija, would you answer that please?”

“Okay, mama,” Rey agreed begrudgingly.

Reluctantly, she untangled her limbs from the chair and left the room, resisting the urge to whine and stomp. Dutifully, she marched down the wide, curved staircase, ignoring the polished bannister in favor of skipping down the stairs two at a time, so used to the descent she could have done it in her sleep.

Through the double glass doors, she glimpsed three girls, all clearly older and curvier than herself, each sporting long hair, short denim shorts and triangle-shaped bikini tops. Slowing as she walked across the foyer, she stamped down the fire igniting in her chest, realizing the sanctuary of her
Saturday morning cartoon date was about to be cut short.

Coming closer, she recognized one of the girls as Cheri, a neighbor from the key.

No way were these girls here for Mr. or Dr. Solo.

They were here for the boys Rey had just left upstairs and they were definitely going to ruin Rey’s morning.

“Thanks, hon,” one of the girls chimed as the three teenaged goddesses wafted into the 2-story foyer, the windowed light pouring in only highlighting their golden hair.

“Sure,” Rey grumbled.

“Poe! Ben! Come on! Get in the pool with us!” another goddess shouted up the stairs.

“Alright, alright. Good God, shut the hell up,” Poe shouted back, coming around the corner of the TV room Rey had just left.

A huge smile graced his handsome face, all dimples and energy as he bounded down the steps noisily.

“You girls are so fucking loud, I swear to God,” he complained as he swung out of sight towards the back doors leading to the pool house.

All three girls giggled profusely as they followed him eagerly, slapping his arm playfully as they watched him yank his t-shirt single-handedly from behind his head. He dropped his shirt on the tile leading to the French doors as he walked, leaving Rey to hear the glass shake as she watched him dive smoothly into the blue pool beyond the lanai.

Each teenaged girl accompanying him hastily removed shorts and splashed into the pool too, joining him immediately, Rey and morning cartoons as forgotten as Poe’s discarded t-shirt.

Rey picked up the shirt off the floor, realizing she should feel more disgusted with the handling of Poe’s sweaty clothes than she did, and headed for the laundry room.

Well, that was fun while it lasted.

She would have to be here all day long, until bedtime for sure, since the party was tonight and her mother would have to be here to oversee details. The day yawned before her in uninteresting
monotony, and her shoulders slumped.

Still grieving her lost moment with Poe, she rounded the corner to watch the pool shenanigans from inside, subjecting herself to the torture of watching Poe with three bikini-clad high school girls a moment longer.

“They’re so loud, aren’t they?”

Rey realized Ben had appeared behind her, staring at the pool over her head.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she replied, not wanting to give away how hurt she was at being discarded.

“I can’t deal with that kind of high-pitched squealing. Want to come with me? I’m going to get coffee. I’ll take you to get some ice cream,” he offered, the disdain on his face clearly directed at the foursome in the pool making the noise.

Rey blinked up at him, surprised at the invitation as her heart lifted slightly at the idea.

“Go ask your mom, I’ll get my wallet.”

Shaking his head in scorn at Poe’s antics which were growing noisier and less innocent by the moment, he left Rey to find her mother.

Not able to think of a single argument against escaping the discomfort of watching Poe flirt with other girls, Rey found her mom in a powder room, changing a lightbulb.

“Mom, I’m going to get ice cream with Ben,” she announced.

Her mother glanced her way with a thoughtful eye.

“Okay, Mija. Be good,” she agreed after a moment.

Rey met Ben’s red BMW convertible, the top already down and air conditioning blasting in the front circular drive, happy to silence the pool noise behind her as she slammed the heavy glass door.

It was already nearly 83 degrees even at 11:00am, the sun a yellow ball in a bluebird sky, not a single cloud maring the skyscape.

Behind his Wayfarer sunglasses, Ben eased the car into first gear evenly as they started down the palm tree-lined driveway towards the iron gates.
Buckled beside him feeling at least thirteen, Rey marveled how differently it felt to be traveling away from the big house in this car, as opposed to her mother’s beige Corolla, every cell sparking with luxury and privilege.

Neither of them said a word as they ambled towards town along the twisty beach road, the wind muffling everything. Fresh orange blossom and freesia breezes wafted through the convertible, and slivers of glittering blue water peeking at them from between the packed row of houses they glided by.

Smiling and reveling in the hot air streaming past her, the burn of the sunshine on her shoulders, the thrum of the engine as it clicked between gears, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Shyly, she glanced at Ben, his face serene, eyes crinkled into slivers behind his glasses. His concentration focused on the gear shift under his right hand, the wheel under his left, his black hair waved chaotically around his face.

Before she was ready for the ride to end, the car slid to a stop in the parking lot in front of “Coffee & Cream,” and she hopped out, smoothing her flyaway hair. Cold air struck Rey’s senses and the sounds of other conversations assailed her, sending her into immediate shivers as she stepped into line beside Ben, stumbling out of the peaceful reverie of the drive and back into the real world.

Ben ordered himself a double espresso, wordlessly gesturing to Rey to order an ice cream, and she heard herself request a mint chocolate chip cone without even thinking to consider another flavor.

Coffee and cone in their respective hands, Rey followed Ben out the door, the bell singing goodbye, and they found their way to a white stone table and bench underneath a rainbow-striped umbrella overlooking the bay.

A small craft was sailing by, close enough to call out to the sailors if they’d wanted, but Rey found themselves in such a companionable silence with Ben, there seemed to be an agreement to remain quiet.

Finally, she decided to break the spell, launching into what felt like a reasonable conversation with the enigma who sat beside her.

“So, thanks for this. That was like, super awkward all those girls and the swimming and everything,” she said, hoping she didn’t sound too much like the 7th grader she was, who had a crush on his brother like she did.


He sipped his coffee and pushed his sunglasses back onto his head, pulling his hair from his face. Landing on a topic Rey could indulge herself in sharing about at length she dove in, grateful for the direction this was heading.
While she chattered about her coach, being a striker, her best friend Rose who played defense, and her team’s lousy expense account which afforded them the same flaking, misshapen jerseys and shorts that had been worn by Suncoast Middle School girls soccer players for 20 years, Rey let go of all her tension.

It flowed through her neck, past her shoulder blades, down her back, into the water behind her, mingling with the wake left by the boat to be sent on the tide out into the Gulf, bound for Maz’s home of Mexico.

She’d never had this free a conversation with Ben before.

He proved decidedly easy to talk to, since he mostly listened, only making noises of amusement or curiosity, never interrupting. It was so profoundly opposite of her emotion-consuming debates with Poe, always a war of insults, flirtation, and challenges, making her heart race and her brain scramble to be impressive.

This experience of being with Ben was more like venting her thoughts, an opportunity to purge her pent-up words as he absorbed them all. Without his volleying them back, Rey found herself left with a deep respite. She’d been drained of all her angst and refueled with her favorite ice cream.

As she tossed the sharp end of her sugar cone into the trash she grinned, squinting up at Ben as she walked beside him to his overheated car, barely able to make out his shadow in the overexposure of the intense sunshine, and he smiled back at her silently.

She was almost sure she saw his teeth when he smiled, but it was too bright to be sure.

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All afternoon, Rey lounged indulgently in her favorite of the rooms on the first floor of the big house, her precious library. She slipped off her flip-flops and lay stomach-down on the cool, burgundy, richly patterned, wool rug, surrounded by several paperback fiction she’d carried in her backpack to the estate with her for the day.

Even though she herself read age-appropriate literature, and not the more intense tomes lining the walls, doing so inside a room so richly constructed, surrounded by wall-to-wall hardback books, Rey imagined herself a studious princess from a fairy tale, insistent on bettering her mind, willfully resisting the king’s orders to abstain.

This was the ideal room for locking yourself away with a book or seven, getting lost in someone else’s imagined world, fantasizing yourself someone who actually deserved a life encased by money and splendor and libraries.

When dinnertime rolled around, she noticed only because she heard her stomach rumble, but she
decided based on the growing noise level outside the library door she would wait for her mother to notice her absence before venturing outside. Otherwise, every house employee would hustle her out of their way from one position to the next as they prepared for the party.

She didn’t hear footsteps, but rather saw a shadow pause in front of the door, the light disappearing underneath it for a second. The noise outside the door amped up exponentially as it momentarily opened just long enough for someone to creep in quietly, and close the door again.

Rey heard deep sighing, and sniffing the air she smiled at the hints of tobacco and Old Spice on the intruder, recognizing who had entered.

She peeked out from behind the chair she had moved into, making her presence known when she scared the daylights out of Han Solo, which is what he nearly said when he caught sight of her in his library.

“Gah! Holy shit, little girl! You scared the bejesus outta me.”

His eyebrows raised unevenly, but otherwise, you’d not believe he’d actually been surprised by Rey there, and he smirked at her in spite of himself.

“Sorry,” Rey scrunched her nose at him apologetically.

She knew Mr. Solo well enough to know he had a soft spot for her, and as she was pretty sure she was his favorite kid on earth, she knew herself to be at no risk of his ever being actually angry with her.

As if to prove that very point, he held out a hot dog to her from his plate, already dressed with ketchup, mustard, and a bun. Taking a bite of one himself, she heard him grumble as he shared.

“Here.”

She scarfed the food down hungrily, accepting the Coke can from his hand, though he had brought only one and wouldn’t have one for himself once he’d parted with this one. Maybe she would have declined, pretended she wasn’t thirsty, but Rey hadn’t ever had a father, and Han Solo had long filled the place in her soul that yearned for one so deeply. She was without strength to reject any kindness from him.

Maz was 58 years old, but she had been widowed since age 34. Since Rey had been adopted at 1-1/2 from state-run foster care, Jose Kanata had been long gone by the time Maz became her mother.
Any parent is better than no parent, Rey had always deeply held to the declaration, repeating it to herself sometimes when she most acutely longed for a family with a perfect nucleus, or felt the pinch in her heart which only a father could have soothed. In her deepest of hearts though, love her mother though she did, she would always grieve the father she never had. In whatever way Mr. Solo offered his presence, Rey was always more than happy to accept.

She was often found tucked into a seat beside him as he captained the family crafts around the docks, learning as she watched him work on engine parts, scraping barnacles off the hull of his boats. Sharing hot dogs in the library while gala guests arrived to the estate, the party building outside the bulky oak door while they devoured junk food seemed an accurate snapshot of their relationship.

Han shuffled to the door, brushing crumbs from his tuxedo, and out of his scruff before meeting Rey’s eye directly with a twinkle, pointing a finger directly at her, lowering his head to convey intensity.

“Not a word about this to her Highness now, little girl. Deal?”

Rey nodded once, affirming she’d keep her lips sealed, both about the contraband hot dogs and his use of Dr. Solo’s least favorite nickname.

He winked at her without even the hint of a smile, feigning seriousness and disappeared.

Slowly but surely, the party outside the library doors developed into a full-blown cacophony of humanity and gaiety, until Rey no longer felt safe in the library.

The corridors, rooms and hallways of the first floor were so consumed with party guests, it would be only a matter of minutes before they spilled into her hiding spot.

Stuffing her backpack with her dog-eared paperbacks, and emptying the remains of her Coke, Rey crept from the library, ducking her head, trying to disappear into the chaos of gowns and tuxedos.

All around her, perfumed women and brandy-drinking men were clumped into groups, laughing and chatting. The microphoned music from the live swing band in the gardens behind the lit swimming pool was barely audible over the din. Waiters snuck through the crowds with hors d’oeuvres and long-stemmed champagne glasses on silver trays, diamonds glittering on the wrists of the ladies who accepted them, gentlemen slapping one another heartily on the back as they ignored the servers, sharing an upper-class joke.

Rey took the stairs carefully, terrified she’d be noticed and questioned, but mercifully no one noticed her in the slightest. Clearly too inconsequential to the proceedings to register on their collective adult radar at all, she disappeared unnoticed. Upstairs, the clatter of the party and the embarrassment of
being a tank top-clad middle schooler amidst a swanky group of grownups lifted as she found her way to an empty guest room.

This room was the one which Rey personally thought of as The Turquoise Room. Outfitted in deep brown and brilliant aqua shades, the 4-poster bed filled the center space beautifully.

Dropping her backpack onto the luggage rack at the foot of the bed she ran her hand appreciatively over the thick coverlet, trailing her fingers over the embroidered pillows and satin-lined pillowcases, eyeing the depth of the pillows, imagining what it would be like to sleep amidst a cloud of comfort like this bed.

Beyond the bed, a Juliet balcony overlooked the pool, and it was the perfect perch for Rey to spy undetected on the party below.

Pushing the gossamer window paneling aside, she opened the single, French door that looked out over the yard and sat, wrapping her arms around her knees, rocking the slightest bit.

The party was in full swing and from her vantage point, Rey could see nearly all of it.

She picked out Dr. Solo with her complicated crown of intricate brunette curls piled on her head, dozens of bracelets encircling her arms, tinkling when she hugged or pinched or touched anyone. She glowed, as much in her element as literally anyone on earth could have been while hosting such an affair.

Nearby, she saw Han, head bowed, but eyes laughing as he took a minute to recover from a story told him by his best first mate, Chewie, the only person at the party who seemed underdressed in a sport coat and jeans. His shaggy head only looked normal with a pair of aviators attached, deep grooves of white around his eyes where they were not suntanned like the rest of him.

Further out, Rey picked out other familiar faces, neighbors and friends of the family, and plenty of unfamiliar ones as well.

She glimpsed Cheri, the blonde neighbor who had kidnapped Poe earlier to take him swimming, wrapped inside a pink and orange sequined mini-dress, blazing like the colors of the sunset behind her. Her head was thrown back in bubbling laughter.

As always though, Rey kept her well-trained eye out for Poe, inspecting the crowd beneath her with precision, intent on spotting him and earnestly keeping him within her view all night long, or at least until her mother forced her away from the window to head home.
Finally, finally, she thought, locating him at the edge of the crowd.

He was nauseatingly good-looking in his clean-cut tuxedo. Gelled hair and trim clothing set off his dimpled good looks to astonishing results.

Rey felt her cheeks heat as she gazed at him, safe to do so at her leisure from this distance. The unlit room behind her afforded her all the secrecy she needed to devour him visually for as long as she cared.

She was just beginning to forget the sting of his earlier abandonment of her when his movements brought her back to the moment. Her eyebrows knit as she watched him closely, as he tugged the young woman in a black slip dress at his left by her elbow, head bowed, words whispered into her ear.

Straightening his bow tie and lifting his chin, Rey watched as he kindly shook hands with everyone he passed, heading for the house, a hand at the woman’s back the entire way.

As soon as he disappeared from view into the first story, Rey clambered up from her post and shot to the guest room door, swinging it open, hurrying to glimpse the first floor.

From the staircase landing where she stood, she spied Poe and the black dress make their way to the library she had deserted earlier. She watched them stop before the door to the library, watched Poe place one hand on the back of her neck and pull her to himself for a deep kiss. They stumbled to the door, never parting lips, staggering backward into the darkened room, and Rey watched as the door closed, punctuating the scene with a thoughtless slam.

She stood for another minute, tears filling her young eyes, pinned to the landing, hoping to see them reemerge.

Maybe he wanted to show her a book?

Or, maybe they’re just taking a breather?

Even at her age, Rey wasn’t confused about how much kissing was likely to be going on in the library between Poe and the black dress.

Personally, she knew how much she herself wanted to be kissing Poe, instead of the black dress, even if she wasn’t sure she could handle that, but she also wasn’t naive enough to think the kissing would be ending anytime soon.

Her heart sank in the anguish of deep disappointment.
Unwilling to stand sentry waiting for them to reemerge, wondering if that might not be an even worse sight to reconcile than them entering the library in the first place, and angry her favorite room was being defiled in such a disturbing way, Rey wiped at her tears.

This sucks.

She wanted to go home.

Retreating to the guest room again, she closed the door softly, deciding she was about to find out what laying in that inviting bed felt like after all.

With the door securely closed behind her, diligently making space in her head for the therapy of sleep, Rey had no idea she herself had been accidentally observed on the stairs.

Ben Solo stood at the far end of the second story landing, tuxedoed and frozen midway around the balcony as he exited his suite to head downstairs to join the party. Silently unseen, he watched the girl at the other end of the landing, just at the top of the looped staircase.

Transfixed he saw her tears well and course down her face. He followed her line of sight to where it terminated at the library door below, feeling compassion swell to a lump in his throat.

His feet rooted, his hand immobile on the banister, he watched undetected as his brother broke her heart.

*****
Independence

Chapter Summary

4 years later...
Ben is a medical student home on Christmas break and Rey is a high school junior.
Updated every Tuesday.
And Thursday.
And sometimes other times.
Because of who I am as a person.

Chapter Notes

Time jump 6-1/2 years coming up next chapter and then we're off
xoxo
come visit: strawberrycupcakehuckleberrypie.tumblr.com
Chapter 2

Independent

April 2012
“Mother. *Listen* to me,” Ben insisted, emphasizing every syllable, “because I will not keep repeating myself. This is a waste of time. There is literally no way I am coming back to Long Beach. There is nothing for me there. My life isn’t in Long Beach anymore. It hasn’t been for a very long time actually, and I cannot fathom trying to fit myself back into that frame of mind again. I refuse to entertain it, and if we do not stop having this conversation every, single time we speak, my phone calls will cease, and I will just see you at the house come Christmas time.”

Ben was lecturing his mother over the phone long-distance from Massachusetts again.

It was impossible to spend any amount of time speaking without it becoming heated, though both Ben and his mother had differing opinions about why that was.

As far as Ben was concerned, spreading his wings out from under the oppressive demands of being a Solo has been limitlessly freeing the last four years of college in Massachusetts. He was loathe to consider going back to Florida for any amount of time now that college was nearly complete, and medical school loomed large.

He’d spent the entire last year interviewing, traveling to medical schools along the east coast in order to make a perfect impression of the medical student he intended to become. His entire academic career since age five prior to that having been one lengthy exercise in achievement.

He’d worked so hard, so *damn* hard to make a name for himself as a student, hewn of his own merits, not riding the coattails of his mother’s or uncle’s or grandfather’s legacy. He’d be damned if he watched it all fade into mist now that his mother had opinions about where he should end up next.

*My mother. As if this is the ideal moment for her to start giving an actual shit about me.*

*All these years of parenting me have been available to her, and yet she chooses age 22 to start paying attention to me instead of her job and my brother.*

*Awesome.*

He couldn’t actually care less about what Leia wanted by that point, but there was no need to be a dick about it. He was an adult, damn it, and more than capable of maintaining his composure. Nearly a college graduate, almost a full-blown student physician in ownership of a properly starched white coat with his name embroidered on the chest, Ben held his temper in check. Mostly.

He’d seen what medicine could do, how it changed both the provider and the patient, and more importantly, he wanted to see what he was made of. He wanted to be beaten into a tool that transformed pain, and he’d pursue his goal as he saw fit.
That’s what Han and Leia had raised him to do, after all, wasn’t it? Pursue goals, be strong, be independent, be a “real man.” They had one hell of a nerve to be aggravated at him about being who they raised him to be now that it was all said and done. If they wanted to hamper and coddle someone, Ben had a suggestion ready.

_Go pick on Poe for a while._

His brother, their golden child had it easy his whole life.

_Give him a hard time for a while and step off._

Ben was only doing what they’d been telling him to do his entire life. He was an arrow drawn tightly back to let fly, and he was in control of where he aimed.

No backing down now.

College in Massachusetts had ushered in a bracing new era for Ben the last four years of undergrad, giving him a sense of self-sufficiency he had never sensed back home in Florida. He’d always felt strangely misplaced at home, a round peg in a distinctly square hole. Pale and too-tall among a horde of sun-worshipping, burnished people, the lone consumer of SPF 100 sunscreen on any school field trip.

His shockingly white skin was only an example of what separated him from his peers in his own mind.

Rarely could Ben find a friend who liked him for who he really was, a smart-assed, quiet academic who dabbled in all sports, but committed to nothing long enough to join a team. Any friends he made could be kept so long as they never made their way to his house, which was never long once they inevitably found out who he was.

He could count on one hand the kids at The Coastal Academy who hadn’t been jonesing for an invite to his house once they figured it out. Once they showed up they either they fell into an immediate bromance with his brother and ignored him forever in favor of the admittedly much-cooler Poe, or they became so enamored by the house, and his high-priced toys he never knew if they didn’t just stay friends to score another invite home to use his shit.

Now when he made friends, they definitely had no way of knowing he was an Organa or a Solo or a Skywalker.

All they knew was he was a tall, dark-haired master of sarcasm who tutored organic chemistry and
aced his MCATs.

In Massachusetts, Ben was reborn, no longer the broody younger prince of a white beach sand castle but an independent, competent scholar in his own right, a card-carrying, Ivy league-enrolled undergrad student, headed for long-term career success.

He wrapped himself in tartan plaid scarves, stocked up on heavy boots, bearing the heavy wool of his peacoat on his broad shoulders with pride all winter long. He relished in the right to stay suntan-free without being mocked, appreciating his longer hair as it set him apart from the clean-cut masses of all the head-shorter fellow males.

His grades skyrocketed, his professors adored him, he’d dated not one but two highly-desirable blondes for a year each, even if they had each both been named Jennifer, (one had been a Gennifer with a “G,” to be fair) and he was surging towards graduation fully anticipating summa cum laude honors.

After this, med school awaited and then a stellar career in plastics.

At some point maybe he’d even treat himself to a wife if he felt like it, but for now, he was aiming higher than that. The very bottom of his priority list included things like Do what Mom and Dad Prefer and Move Back to a Sleepy Beach Town like Long Beach Key.

No way.

He’d had a taste of autonomous success, and it tasted pretty damn near to satisfaction.

He’d see his parents at graduation in May and if they chilled the hell out he’d see about continuing phone communication.

If he deemed it too draining, he’d see them at Christmas anyway.

Either way, the distance was helpful as he had time to decide for himself how much access he wanted to give them to himself.

His dad was never around anyway, always out on a fishing trip with Chewie in the Gulf somewhere. Only his mom was really at home in Florida with Poe, and they could keep one another busy there and leave him in Massachusetts to himself.

They’d always preferred one another’s company to his, anyway, he believed. His mom always saw more of herself in Poe, sharing their whole cherished “adopted child bond,” having both been
adopted as young children.

There was no opportunity for Ben to share in something as niche as that with two living parents more or less co-habitating through his childhood. He’d enjoyed no more success in bonding with their dad as effortlessly as Poe did over sailing and boats either, so after a couple decades he’d stopped trying to compete with his brother for commonality with his mom or common interests with his dad.

He loved his brother, he really did, but it was fucking defeating being compared to a bronzed, letterman-sporting older brother who’d slept his way through homecoming court even as a high school freshman, for God’s sake. It had been a welcome reprieve going to college where no one knew Poe, and Ben wasn’t constantly compared with him.

Personlly, he missed Poe, truth be told. It would have been cool if he could show off his cool older brother to his college friends. Poe was a kick in the head to spend time with, smart about humor and women and life in a way that made Ben deeply consider his point of view. He never ceased to surprise Ben with his capers, and Poe was still the champion of making Ben laugh so hard his face ached.

He had an inkling Poe would make one excellent wing man at college bars around Boston, and he’d no doubt have given Ben some street cred with his repressed, northern-born college friends, but he’d never taken Poe up on the offer to visit him up north.

He’d always given into his insecurities that whispered to Ben the threats of falling victim to the same patterns of loserhood he’d known growing up one grade behind the infamous Poe Dameron Solo, legendary teenager extraordinaire.

Ben would graduate, spend the summer working to enter medical school in July, prepped and raring to go, ready to impress the next round of medical physicians and mentors who would shape him into a master of the knife.

He’d go home to the key at Christmas, and see the family. He'd enjoy the pool without worrying about getting sun poisoning, drive his car around with the top down. He’d sleep in his own bed, smell the salty air, drink a decent mai tai, kick back in the dock hammock and watch the boats sail by with white lights strung from bow to stern.

He’d take the boat out with his dad to catch snook, play gin rummy and pass a bowl of M&M’s back and forth with his mom, pick up some girls at the beach bar with his brother, sleep in till noon if he wanted.

He would enjoy Florida for what it was, a nice, short-term diversion, not a permanent selection.
In Leia’s opinion, Ben had been far-flung long enough the last four years.

She was tired of losing her people one at a time, of feeling helpless in the face of her family members being snatched away when all she ever wanted was to fill her big, dumb house with a family brimming to overflowing with love. She was stuck with the darn thing, after all. She needed to steer it as she saw fit, and it wouldn’t just run itself.

*Why did everyone assume the estate would just run itself?*

She was grateful of course that Poe was home in Florida nearby, of course, but it was still a decent drive. Han was off captaining deep sea fishing charters so often you’d think all he had left were sea legs anymore, and it was worse than pulling teeth to get Ben to agree to come visit for even a weekend away from school up north.

Hope had shined so surely when she’d thought about both her beloved sons graduating college the same year, since Poe and taken his gap year while Ben was a high school senior. Since they’d each begun college she had spent far too many nights laying in bed, staring at the pale pink painted ceiling above her California King bed alone. She imagined both her boys joining her plastic surgery practice once they’d finished medical school and residency, each living a short drive away, near enough to spend days working and playing as a family just as they had done when her boys were little.

Surely, Han would stick closer to home with both his boys home again, too.

Leia knew that man well enough after all these years, no matter what arguments he made, she knew how much he missed having them lumbering noisily down the stairs, leaving their book bags and empty orange juice cartons on the kitchen counters.

Surely there would be grandchildren sooner or later. If the boys lived near home, she’d be a dream hostess to anyone and everyone her boys brought over her home’s threshold, the perfectly warm woman she’d known her own mother to be to her own friends growing up.

Her boys would bring home their girlfriends or boyfriends, whichever was fine, she couldn’t care less who they loved as long as she got the chance to know them herself, too. They’d all settle in for Sunday afternoon football games on the downstairs couches, and Thanksgiving potlucks with her mother’s crystal goblets filled with deep red wine, and summer swim parties in the backyard. Han
would grill burgers and after she’d spent a day in the O.R., her legs aching to sit down, she’d see her boys’ faces smiling back at her, making it all worthwhile.

All the lipo, the boob and butt jobs, the endless parade of nearly-perfectly primped women who streamed through her office doors for consultations on their noses, their chins, their cheeks and their hips had afforded Leia the chance to slow down her workload.

Without her three boys at home though, she found no need to hurry away from the O.R. and still found herself even now working 70 plus hours a week.

What time she spared from the hospital she spent in the cleft lip and palate clinics she helped facilitate in smaller towns around the state, enjoying the chance to pour her decades’ worth of expertise in surgical plastics into anything resembling honor.

When her own kids were younger and she’d possessed the vitality, she’d flown out of the country with teams visiting Central America and the Siberian mountains and the horn of Africa. She’d relished the shot at surgically repairing dozens of children and adult’s cleft lips and palates round the clock for a week or two at a time. Stumbling back to her palatial home afterwards, she’d be completely wrung out with the exhausting rewards of accomplishment.

It had been a long time since she’d flown overseas with relief efforts though, her stamina reserved for her office clients and the monthly clinics.

Someday hopefully, grandchildren would change all of that for her, and she would celebrate that day when it arrived with fervor.

She would empty a guest room upstairs, ordering a brand new white crib and changing table, filling it with anything her grand-baby could need for the nights she was allowed to have the baby. She’d be sure to invest in the most spectacular glider and ottoman money could buy, anticipating the glorious experience of rocking one of her sons’ perfect, precious babies to sleep in her ample arms.

Hopefully, it would all would pay off by then, all her investment and intentions coming to fruition. For all her daydreams though, Leia refused to allow herself to imagine her future grandchild’s gender, sure that even the foggiest concept of a girl in their family would be too rich a dream to keep unspoiled.

Some dreams are too ambitious, and they can crumble under the weight of hopes too heavy to come true.

Leia had learned that lesson before.

Till the time for family expansion actually came, she labored to get through her work load one case at a time, pushing her graying braids under a surgical cap decorated with sail boats as an homage to her constantly wanderlustful husband.
Scrubbing in beside an ever-rotating cycle of younger and younger rookie surgeons and annoying the living shit out of her sons on the phone, she heard their thinly-veiled exasperation in their tone. Hounding them for their time, their concessions, their weeks off, she felt ashamed of herself even as she found she was incapable of stopping.

Today though, she would head home after this 3pm rhinoplasty case, and pour them each a drink, forcing Maz to come sit. They would put their feet up together whether she was satisfied with her day’s housekeeping agenda having been met or not.

Leia was already planning the take-out she’d grab on the way home, maybe Chinese. They both loved orange chicken from the place near the key and they could share one order of fried rice without leftovers remaining.

Maybe they’d find themselves with their toes in the pool water, propped up on mesh lounge chairs, Leia’s grey scrubs hiked up to her knees and Maz’s capri pants pulled up mid-calf, splashing like the girls they each still felt they were in their heart of hearts.

Maz understood, as she missed Rey most evenings while she ran from soccer to math team to chorus practice, flitting around town like the swamped 15-year-old she was.

They were turning into quite a pair, Leia and Maz.
They could sit and discuss their babies to their heart’s content, gossiping and praising and comparing motherhood notes till they laughed themselves breathless, no worry of being overheard by their kids. Each of their children were elsewhere, busy with the business of growing into adults.

Ben was in Boston, Poe was 2 hours south at West Florida University and Rey was god-knows-where like all high schoolers.
Han and Chewie wouldn’t be home for a month at least.
For now, as it was most nights, there would just be Leia at home.
Thank God she still had Maz.

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December 2012
It was genuinely embarrassing how excitedly Ben drank in the key after such a lengthy hiatus.
He had fully expected to enjoy seeing his family, the last six months having been so much more tolerable in terms of their interactions since medical school had begun, his family beginning to respect his time and input in a more pronounced way, but he was truly unprepared for how authentically pleased he was to breathe in the humid air.

“Hux,” his father muttered to the gate guard as he slowed to a stop.

“Mr. Solo,” Hux replied, always professional.

Craning around Ben’s dad to peer into the car, he spotted Ben.

“Ah, Ben, good to have you home.”

“Hey, Hux. Yeah, Merry Christmas.”

It was such an absurd position to be in, speaking to a family estate employee who was near his own age, basically a peer with such formal inflection. Ben couldn’t help but imagine Hux a fellow college student in Boston, and he wondered what their interactions would be like without the bonds of professionalism to limit them. Would they be friends in an alternate universe?

The only alternate universe Ben knew was the one he had forged first in Boston and now in New York where he’d started medical school. It was hard enough to reckon that Ben Solo with the persona he slipped back into just being in his dad’s slowly-decaying Suburban again on the drive home from the airport.

“Merry Christmas,” Hux said, hurrying to open the gates for Han, whose well of patience had run completely dry in the moment it had taken them to exchange the niceties.

Han pulled the Suburban down the lane, and Ben felt his heart churn with the familiarity of the crunch of gravel under the tires. He rolled down the window, leaning his face towards the air like a hyper golden retriever, the muggy key breeze pushing his hair from his face.

It was striking how surprised he was to feel himself enjoying his reintroduction to the key.

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed his father surveying him in amusement, and he tugged his mouth into a half-smile, allowing himself to savor the moment. Ben climbed into the carport and stretched his impressively-long arms, “knuckle-draggers,” his dad had always called them affectionately, and shook out the stiffness of the taxi, two airplanes and the airport drive before breathing in, cataloging each scent carefully.
Magnolias, jasmine and the oranges in their grove all lingered on the air, even out here beside his father’s collection of rusted vehicles and boats. The collective mingling bouquet smelled like home to him.

Reaching for his bags and losing the contest to his dad who took the opportunity to carry them inside the house himself, Ben crouched down instead to pet BB, ruffling the softer white fur under the old cat’s neck.

“Hey!”

A voice chirped behind him, too high-pitched to be mistaken for his brother and too innocent to be his mother.

Turning around, it took Ben a minute to process the young woman with the grease smeared across her forehead, standing before him in an oversized t-shirt and spandex shorts to her knees. She was a mess of dripping wet, oxidized boat parts in her arms she must have been cleaning, her shirt beneath them stained a watery red.

His brain told him this was Rey, Maz’s daughter, but his eyes were taking a while to catch up to agreeing with that information.

“Hey yourself.”

She was still the same long-legged girl he’d remembered from back in the day, but it was obvious in looking at her exactly how long Ben had been away from home.

Without braces her smile had becoming something blinding, all sharp angles and bright eyes, and her auburn hair tumbled around her face softening it in a way he certainly couldn’t remember her ponytail ever doing when she was younger.

Suddenly, Ben jerked his mind into reality.

This is a child in front of you. Stop being such a pervert for God’s sake. Close your fucking mouth and stop staring at her.

Shifting immediately into big brother mode, he considered a hug? a side-hug? a shoulder squeeze?

Finally, he settled on the world’s most awkward high five as a greeting once she dropped the boat parts onto a wooden workbench.
Rey laughed at him, falling into step beside him as he headed towards the house. He rerouted his thoughts towards greeting his mother manually, shooing anything else from his mind.

“So, you’re home for Christmas, huh? Are you happy? Was your flight good? Was it cold up in New England? Do you get much snow? And you finished college already? That’s insane! I’m still a high school junior and you’re already finished with college. I literally cannot even believe it! And now you’re a medical student, all ready to be a doctor like your mom because apparently, you haven’t had enough school yet which I frankly believe is crazy! Personally, I cannot wait to be done with high school. I can’t get it over with fast enough. I can’t believe you’re so old and still trying to be a student. Aren’t you so sick of it?”

She ran at the mouth in a way that seemed incredible to him, her chit chat showing her youth, but he grinned at her rambling, happy to let her handle the burden of conversing alone.

Before he could address any of her questions and think through why he still couldn’t find words to speak back to her, he was at the kitchen back door. He kicked off his boots before crossing inside, leaving the ghost of Ben Solo, east coast medical school student, alongside them.

Entering the kitchen he turned quickly on his heel, closing the bottom half of the Dutch door before Rey could follow him, leaving her on the other side of the threshold. Leaning on the top with both his elbows, he was eye level with the still-talking teenager.

He narrowed his eyes as he let her finish, deciding how to extricate himself from this weirdly appealing situation, taking her in and deciding he would need to keep a tight rein on himself over this trip.

She was too cute to be acting this available, and it’s clear she was too unaware of her charm to be intentionally enticing, but she was 15 and he was an adult. Putting a solid wooden door between them felt like the safest thing he could do.

“Did you always talk this much?”

He pinched her up-turned nose, smirking at her squeak of surprise indignation before leaving quickly to find his mom and brother further inside the house.

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Two days home and Ben remembered why he stayed gone from his parents’ house. The truth of the old adage that the more things change, the more they absolutely do stay the same held true in the Solo house.

He sighed and rolled a wilted asparagus stalk around his plate with his fork, glancing up at his brother across the table to make use of the eye contact language only siblings are fully capable of employing fluently.
His brother met his look with one of his own, Poe exhaling through puffed cheeks, eyebrows raised high and Ben knew they were experiencing the same exasperation with their parents, their usual argument spinning into a fully formed shouting match over steak and scalloped potatoes.

“I just don’t feel like it Leia, that’s why. Is that not sufficient reason for you?”

Han shouted across the table-clothed dining room table, wine glasses and china plates vibrating.

“No, it isn’t Mr. Feelings, it’s not good enough and I’ll tell you why. I have a responsibility to raise as many funds as I possibly can for this cause and hosting a party is one of the best ways to accomplish raising a huge amount of money in a very short amount of time,” Leia countered.

“And besides,” she continued, “it’s already completely planned. I am not going to cancel a perfectly good event only one week beforehand, even if you can’t be bothered to attend.”

Han had already thrown down his cloth napkin, waving off the end of her sentence with both hands dismissively, shaking his head as he left the table before Leia could take a new breath.

Everyone at the table knew he was heading for the carport to tinker with some ancient, rickety boat parts.

Ben wasn’t sure what he himself wanted to do next, but he was fairly certain the dinner portion of the evening is over.

He wondered whether there was dessert in the kitchen, maybe chocolate chip cookies. He wondered how long he had to sit before he left the table to go check. One of the perks of being back home was the endless availability of fresh food, and he didn’t see why his parents’ bickering should limit the possibility of his rummaging through the pantry as soon as he was able.

“Mom,” Poe began as he stood to clear dishes. “What’s the date of the Christmas party again?”

“The twenty-first. Why, son?”

Silence.

“Why, Poe?” she repeated.
Another second slipped by before Poe casually shrugged his right shoulder, moving towards their mother to retrieve her dinner plate, stacking it on top of his own, careful not to chip the gold piping.

“Well, actually, I was thinking about maybe going on this ski trip with some buddies of mine that weekend. Ya know, a little guys’ weekend up in the mountains, some fresh air, and some fresh powder, hit the slopes for maybe 2 days, come back in time for Christmas morning with the family. Good old fashioned male bonding time,” he finally responded, filling in any blanks with his nonchalance.

Ben pushed his chair with the back of his knees as he rose to stand, listening. As he cleared his own dish, stacking it above Han’s, he studied Poe’s genius in handling their mother, always amazed at how Poe knew the maneuvers to disarm her anger without tripping over his own temper in the process.

Ben had never mastered that.

He quietly watched his mother’s face as she contemplated the news Poe had delivered, trying to memorize the strategy his brother used, wondering if he might ever be able to put it into practice in quite the same way himself one day.

“Well, I mean, listen. You are an adult, Poe. Obviously, you can do what you choose. I will just tell you this, I am your mother and I miss you very much and it would mean the world to me if you would choose a different weekend to go skiing and drinking and god-knows-what-else with your college buddies and spend that one Saturday here at home attending your family’s annual Christmas party which supports the cleft clinic that means so much to me. But, ultimately I will leave the decision up to you.”

Poe scooted around the end of the table, squeezing their mother’s shoulders up into his chest, kissing her crown of braids.

“Mwah!”

Strutting out of the dining room towards the kitchen without another word, never having answered Leia’s silent question as to what he planned to choose, Ben realized maybe they already knew.

Leia looked up at Ben, still standing at his place at the dining room table, a small stack of plates in his large hands. Examining her to understand how his brother just got out of attending their mother’s beloved annual Christmas party without causing an uproarious fight, he shook his head in bewilderment.

“Hey,” she said, conspiratorially. “Want a brownie?”

Ben remembered another old adage about there being no place like home and he grinned down at
Christmas at the Organa-Solo estate, true to form, was a swanky holiday.

Multiple fully decorated 15-foot trees, hundreds of white lights strung in the palm trees around the house, and tastefully festive decor scattered everywhere you look. Florida may have been limited when it came to seasonal weather but that didn’t mean in any way that you wouldn’t think the estate was the prettiest holiday scene you’d ever seen.

His bedhead smoothed, but still bleary-eyed in his search for coffee, Ben descended the staircase the morning of the party to find his mother’s minions already in full holiday blitz mode, Maz commanding a small army of employees apparently as soon as the sun had risen in order to prepare for the event.

As he stumbled into the kitchen, he found even more people milling around, confusing his coffee-deprived brain and making him wrinkle his brow crabbily.

“Want some help?”

It was Rey. Rey was here, and she was offering to help him and yes, he nodded, yes he wanted coffee and could she read his mind so he didn’t have to speak out loud? Apparently, yes.

She pointed to the lanai beyond the French doors, raised her eyebrows. “Go.”

Ben obediently went without hesitation.

Dropping himself gracelessly into a cushioned outdoor rocker on the quieter back porch, the silence of the fresh morning was interrupted only by the yard maintenance crew scurrying about on riding mowers in the distance. The subdued hum of the machines mercifully muted the discord of the house beyond the glass doors behind him.

Before he could worry where his coffee was, Rey appeared at his shoulder offering him a sweet smile, as she handed him a polished pale blue mug, the heat satisfying in his hands, promising his brain the good stuff was on its’ way.

She was still such a sweet girl. She carried such an open-hearted kindness about her.

Ben had no one else to even compare her vulnerably kind nature with.
Every other face he conjured from his memories’ files paled in stark contrast to her bright, direct manner of decency, not an ounce of deceit bleaching her effortless ability to shine good-naturedly.

Ben was a bastard compared to Rey, he thought, contemplating her as he took a restorative sip of his coffee. He silently thanked God she hadn’t been within a hundred miles of him while he had been in college.

He would never be as nice a person as Rey, but he’d shaken some of the asshole out of his system since then and he was relieved, conscious of her innocence beside him now.

“You’re an angel,” he muttered, his voice still gravelly from sleep.

She moved to climb into a matching rocking chair, curling her legs up into her rough-hewn hoodie, gazing out at the Gulf beyond the pool and the yard crew cutting the grass, the chair rocking briskly as she bounced around.

“It’s wild here today. I’m thankful I have a game to escape to. It’s going to be a madhouse here all day long till the party.”

Ben knew how loud and disruptive a day of party prep could be at the estate, but he had a suite designed specifically for eluding detection from crowds, so he was unworried how to withstand it personally. Rey, he knew, had no such retreat on the grounds and he sorted through options to offer.

Without caffeine he was having a hard time thinking straight though, so she couldn’t know what he was thinking when she continued.

“I’ll probably hit the road as soon as my best friend, Rose, comes to pick me up for our game at 10, and stay gone the rest of the day. It’s nuts here on party days.”

If she wanted to stay absent on a day like today of all days, he certainly wouldn’t blame her.

She was 15 years old, she likely had a mall to wander through or some skinny, pre-pubescent boys to ogle. Ben wouldn’t blame her one bit for preferring to spend time far away from the bustle of the overwhelming, party central atmosphere of this house today and he wasn’t about to suggest she hang out with someone 7 years older than herself.

She had called him old a few days ago. She would probably think his method of dealing with pandemonium dull, if she knew he intended to binge watch DVDs in bed with a box of Nilla wafers. Even if he thought up something interesting to spend time doing today, why would she want to do that, instead of whatever her high school friends could entertain her with?

*Maybe she had a boyfriend, too.*

How could he have even known, one way or the other? There wasn’t any reason for her to tell him.

*Wasn’t she into Poe all those years ago, right?*

Either way, she must want to avoid the house today because Poe left on his “2-day” ski trip three
days ago and wasn’t set to return for two more days yet, no chance of him rolling up, impressing her
with his jokes and physical humor. She was probably dying to skip out of this house and go be
young.

There was surely nothing for her to hang around here for.

“What are you going to do today?”

“I’ll find a way to stay busy,” he said, resting his head against the headrest, staring straight ahead,
trying to appear more relaxed than he felt.

Who cares if she isn’t impressed with my ambivalent answer about my day? What do I care?

He took a sip of his coffee and leaned his head back, rocking his chair slowly, making every
concerted effort to ground himself with the coffee and the headrest and the rocking, but struggling to
keep his head from swimming all the same.

Even though his coffee was half gone, he still felt like the wave runner on the Gulf he could make
out on the water, bobbing too hard on the waves, jolting with every dip of the surf.

He stole a glance at Rey, her eyes still fixed on the waves as his had been.

He remembered a time he’d seen her eyes fill to overflowing with tears and hurt, thinking how
transparent the hazel had turned just then, how the color switched to something iridescent.

It’s crazy he remembered that, he knew, but he’d never forgotten that moment, that look of pain that
had washed over her face, how his chest nearly burst with sympathy that quickly gave way to anger
at his brother.

She’d been so careful to stay away from his family in any meaningful way the next few weeks until
Ben had graduated high school and left for Massachusetts soon thereafter.

He wondered again whether she was still into his brother, but he just as quickly dismissed it,
concentrating on her age and then his own and the inadmissibility of that wayward train of thought.

He drained his mug and stood resolutely, pulling himself to full height, towering over Rey who sat
twisted into a sun-kissed knot of pouting, girly trouble - the absolute worst kind of trouble
imaginable - and Ben concentrated on being more determined than ever to reclaim his role as elder
brother with her, ignoring her nearly melancholy face.

“Okay, well, I’m outta here. Have a good game.”
He marched towards the French doors before he could catch himself thinking about her eyes anymore.

“But, Ben? You’ll be at the party tonight though, right?”

He heard her as he walked away, and the way she said his name made his brain stutter and his stomach stir confusingly, which he intentionally attributed to the coffee he’d just downed before any other thought had time to materialize.

He pushed away the satisfaction of her seeking his presence at a party when he so clearly remembered watching her melt from rejection by his brother during the last one.

He ignored the flush of pride and protective instinct that bloomed fiercely inside his lungs, and he breathed it all back down where it came from, waiting for it all to dissipate like a gas into the air around them.

“Uh yeah, of course,” he said coolly.

“See ya.”

Stepping back inside the house, suddenly alone, he barricaded himself from Rey with another door between them, holding the doorknob too long.

His exhale was a great whooshing thing that surprised him. He didn’t even know he’d been holding his breath.

Grateful for all the people milling around, he headed back upstairs alone, seeking absolute solitary confinement, and as he reached the door to his room where he fully intended to spend the majority of the day straight up hiding, realizing he still had a death grip on his coffee mug.

Oh well.

Not a chance in hell he was going back downstairs to drop it off now.

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By 6pm, Ben had showered the day away, his mind having been thankfully distracted with 3 seasons worth of “X-Files” since morning. He was in a much better head space than earlier, and he felt carefree as he stepped into his tux pants, smoothing a white undershirt into his waistband.
This was what he needed, some quality, introvert-paced, alone time. That was what always made him find his center again, and he felt his mind firmly planting itself in place as he moved through the motions of dressing for the Christmas party.

His day having been a free-for-all, he’d skipped lunch entirely, deciding at the time he didn’t want to risk interactions with literally anyone who might be downstairs earlier.

Now that he was feeling refreshed and restored though, he decided to go stock up on fuel before spending the evening picking through the platters of fancy bite-sized foods, wishing instead for a mile-high turkey club.

Taking the steps slowly, he breathed in the fragrance of the fir trees in the foyer, grand enough to impress anyone who entered tonight’s affair, and he took a minute to appreciate Christmas, to enjoy being away from the demands of the school year.

His optimism dissipated considerably when he rounded the corner and faced the kitchen, his steps slowing to a crawl as he saw not only a room full of uniformed wait staff but Rey at the center of a kitchen tornado, already dressed and ready for the Christmas party.

He’d definitely never seen her like this before. He wasn’t sure he’s ever seen anyone like this before. Standing with her back to him, he could scan her and gulp past his Adam’s apple without being seen.

She had silver kitten heels on her feet, strapped a complicated way up her ankles, beneath a pink, chiffon-layered party dress which ended a couple inches above her knee. The bodice was pulled in so small he had no choice but to think he could span her entire waist in his hands. He couldn’t make out anything above, but he could see her curls hang down her back in a way that suggested she’d spent time making her hair look special.

She was a fucking bubblegum-colored cupcake of virginal sweetness, and when she turned to see something he caught her eye. She lit up from inside like a living string of Christmas lights, her pale, glossy lips smiling at him from ear-to-ear.

*This is not good.*

He had to cover and say something, and fast before he allowed himself to bolt upstairs again, sitting on his hands till dawn to keep them to himself.

He bunched his hands into fists, cracked his knuckles and adjusted his neck side-to-side while working his jaw.

*Get it together, Solo.*

“Well, don’t you clean up nicely?” he started, and then, deciding it sounded too suggestive he added,
“who could tell, under the boat grease you’re normally covered in?”

He wasn’t certain but it almost looked like she started to blush under her makeup.

“What about you, are you going to finish getting dressed tonight? Or are you attending the fancy party in a t-shirt, huh, doctor-boy?”

That’s right, he remembered, he hadn’t finished getting dressed yet. He was standing in a plain white t-shirt while she looked like a teenaged prom queen. That made him remember he’d not been to a prom in five years. Swerving back to reality, he concentrated on his original directive, food.

Moving past her, attempting to clear his vision of her pink dress and matching lips, he headed for the fridge where he found plenty of distraction available. He sorted through the food efficiently, grabbing a chocolate protein drink, a handful of grapes and a cold chicken drumstick, quickly eating where he stood, the better to keep himself occupied before he could say anything asinine or worse, flirtatious.

He headed for the stairs, and Rey followed on his heels. Before he could decide whether to allow her to accompany him or banish her, she’d plucked the bunch of grapes from his hand, popping them one at a time into her mouth without asking permission, step for step beside him as they ascended the staircase.

Knowing there was no chance he was heading towards his bedroom with Rey following, Ben took a left at the upstairs landing and headed into the den. Propping his feet up on the tufted, square leather ottoman, he sunk into the far end of the couch, still eating the chicken.

He hoped the chicken would last all night. Once it was gone he had to talk, and he had no clue where that would lead.

He was not equipped for this scenario.

He may have been in over his head and he considered panicking, but Rey didn’t seem to share his worries. She flounced onto the other end of the couch, her layered skirt fanning around her like she was royalty, finishing the purple grapes she’d carried upstairs, settling in to interrogate him.

“Whatcha been up to all day?” she pried innocently.

Okay, this is easy.

As long as she asked questions and he only had to answer, he would likely be fine.

Then, remembering how fruitlessly he’d spent his day, he avoided instead of answering candidly.
“Oh, ya know. ‘doctor-boy’ things. What have you been up to? How was your game?”

“We lost, 2-0. Actually, I had a great breakaway down the pitch with a beautiful shot on goal but I fucked it up and it went high over the goal, so that sucked.”

“Heyheyhey, watch the language. You kiss your mother with that mouth, little girl?”

Her eyes grew wide as she smiled slowly.

“‘Little girl.’ That’s what your dad calls me,” a grin played on her lips.

They weren’t so shiny anymore, her lips, now that she’d eaten the grapes and he was so relieved he could have thanked her out loud, but instead he made a mental note not to call her the same thing his father did. It was bad enough she constantly commented on how much older he was than her, he didn’t need her comparing him too closely to his father, for God’s sake.

“Yeah well, you are little.”

He prayed silently that came out more innocently than it sounded in his head.

Her forest green backpack lay on the ottoman between them and he reached for it.

“What’s in here?”

Rey jumped off the couch so fast her eyes flashed at him, and he caught a whiff of something peach-scented.

He made use of his long arms, snatching it before she could and he felt the satisfaction of getting a rise out of her as he stood to lift it above his head, a solid foot plus over her grasp as she came close in an attempt to grab it back.

“Ah-ah-ah,” he needled her. “First tell me what you’re hiding in here and I’ll give it back.”
She bounced, reaching for the bag, and Ben grinned as he played keep-away with it.


_This is easy. Just keep her annoyed so she doesn’t get too soft-spoken or too pouty or too still or too close._

"Ben,” she whined. “Come on!”

Bending down to unstrap her heels, she kicked them off to jump up onto the couch behind him, still reaching for the bag.

He easily danced out of reach, forcing her to jump down from the couch again, pouting, before she hit his bicep with a loud slap and accused him.

“You’re a monster.”

He grinned smugly.

“Yes, I am.”

Highly entertained at her outrage, he tossed the backpack into her arms, moving past her to sit in an armchair at the far end of the room. He needed a minute, needed to screw his head back on straight again, needed space between them.

“Alright, alright. You win,” he conceded.

Rey threw the bag over her shoulder and headed for the doorway.

“Be right back.”

Ben took a deep breath, a confounding cocktail of frustration, disappointment and relief. He chugged the forgotten protein drink, rebalancing himself mentally, and propped his feet again. A full belly
always helped him focus.

At this rate, he’d have to eat himself to death in order to carry on a decent conversation with Rey.

Downstairs the party was ramping up, the musicians playing carols as guests arrived, his mother’s voice echoing up the stairs as she graciously welcomed each person. He knew his father to be nearby, likely nursing two finger’s worth of bourbon, planning to spend the evening talking shop with Chewie once he showed up.

Rey sailed back into the room without her backpack in no time, but it was clear what she’d been up to when she left.

Not only had she discarded her silver heels near the couch and cleanly snacked her lip gloss off, she’s apparently smuggled sweatpants in her bag because she was wearing a gray pair underneath her party dress, effectively making her more comfortable but decidedly less prepared for a formal event.

*Good. Cover up as much skin as possible. Go find a robe to put on over that dress, too.*

Rey propped herself on the arm of Ben’s chair and he smelled peaches again. His nerves made him nearly jump out of the chair, realizing she was way too close for him to sit still.

Sliding towards the ground, he shoved the heavy leather ottoman out of the way, making space to stretch his legs.

Rey hopped the arm of the chair behind him, and sat atop her legs twisted into a pretzel, her crossed shins bumping his shoulders as Ben sat leaning against the chair.

Before he knew it, her hands gathered his hair, and he froze, unable to move a muscle let alone think clearly enough to move further away.

“You need some braids,” she said, carding through his hair.

Ben had literally no response, so he said nothing, did nothing, thought nothing concrete. He was just existing now, relying on his automatic body reflexes to keep him alive, using his powers of concentration solely to keep breathing normally.

Girls had a thing for his hair, he knew it. Plenty of girls tried to mess with it over the years, run their
fingers through it, and he was normally pretty proud of that, but the interaction with Rey was fraught with conflict.

If he were a better man than he knew himself to be, he’d rebuke himself and make for the door, not stopping till he was downstairs in a bow tie, acting like a well-adjusted adult, but damn it, she wanted to touch his hair, and he felt helpless to move even an inch away.

*Why can’t I think straight?*

“Sheleaned down, her mouth inches from his left ear as she speaks, and he overcompensated by replying too casually, even though it made very little sense.

“Nah.”

*God, Solo, you sound like a genius tonight.*

Rey continued to part and pull at his dark hair, fingers working nimbly as silence settled around the room, the teasing evaporated.

Ben made use of the stillness to sort his thoughts into columns subjectively. He logically understood he was physically attracted to Rey because she was a feminine, young woman, and he was a straight man, but he also rationally understood the complicating factors. She was technically seven years his junior, still three solid years from legality, the daughter of his family’s housekeeper and had until recently, been something of a kid-sister type.

Ben decided much of his current situation likely stemmed from the scene he’d witnessed some four and a half years earlier, when he saw Rey crying on the stairs at the party. As far as he knew, she was still completely unaware of the moment he himself had since revisited many times in his head.

Concluding that must be part of why he was experiencing attachment to her, he knew he was being handed an opportunity to clear the air regarding that moment.

He’d come clean about having observed her tearfulness that night of the party, and all the suppressed awkwardness of this week’s interactions would dissolve, once again leaving him established in a big brother role.
The intimacy of the moment he had stumbled upon that night must have been what was entangling them in Ben’s mind. The sooner he confessed it to her, the sooner they’d disentangle completely.

Clearing his throat, and trying to tune out Rey’s nails gently scraping his scalp sending shivers down his spine, Ben took a chance at pissing her off, and gently began.

“You know, Rey. There’s something I’ve never told you before and I’m thinking maybe I ought to tell you now.”

“Go for it,” she replied softly, without skipping a beat or slowing her hands.

It was all the invitation he needed.

“A few years ago, we were having a party a lot like the one tonight, and I was late getting ready, as usual, and when I walked out my bedroom door I saw you at the top of the staircase.”

Her hands became sluggish in his hair.

Maybe she’d laugh it off, he’d hoped, or perhaps struggle to place the memory, but it came into focus for them both, and Ben felt the room get thick with the pressure of that recreated moment in their shared memory.

“I saw you crying that night. I had no right to stop and stare at you while you were having a moment like that. Honestly, it just stopped me dead in my tracks. But still, I’m sorry.”

He was holding his breath, he’d realized, and he forced himself to keep breathing.

After a breath, her fingers sped up again determinedly, and Ben heard her sigh deeply.

I’ve hurt her, he thought, about to admonish himself.

“Oh, Ben, thank you for telling me,” Rey said. “Yeah, that night sucked. Pried open a very old abandonment scar for me, which, you know, as an adoptee is basically my oldest wound. The ‘primal wound’ they call it. So, yeah. What you saw was maybe a little about that night? But, probably even more about all my mommy and daddy issues.”

She offered this treasure of information so sincerely, so graciously it soothed the guilt he’d been carrying these last four and a half years, and he realized in that moment it had the exact opposite effect he intended, further cracking his heart open wider, further cementing something.
“Wow. That’s deep, Rey.”

She laughed out loud at him, sweeping the gloom that had settled, replacing it with a cascade of humor.

“Okay well, sorry,” she joked, distancing them from the seriousness of her trauma story.

“I can tell you something, too,” she proposed, messing up her completed work of braids in his hair, ruffling it thoroughly, leaving herself a clean slate with which to start over from scratch.

“Go on, surprise me.”

“Remember when you took me out for ice cream in your red convertible? That was the highlight of my life for a while. That was, like, the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me.”

Ben had no memory of this.

_Shit, she has surprised me. How can I not remember this?_

“How old were you?”

He hoped it would jog his memory and subsequently remind him of her younger self, forcing him back to his preferred elder brother status.

“Oh, like eleven,” she told him, her hands brushing his ears and neck as she collected and coiled his hair.

Nothing about her recollection sounded familiar to him, and he decided it was for the best.

He’d much prefer to think of Rey as an awkward eleven-year-old rather than some angelic fairy girl who traipsed around his house in pink and silver as if she was made of peaches and goodness, slipping her hands into his hair rendering him boneless, but he didn’t even want to concentrate his thoughts on her hard enough to transform her in his mind’s eye.

Suddenly, his head felt too light, and he was in danger of it lolling helplessly into her hands behind
him. It was time to stand up, shake it off, clear his head.

“Why don’t you go find us some food downstairs, scavenger?” he suggested, wondering whether she would take instruction from him like this so he could regroup.

Thankfully, she shoved him away from the chair, making him double over at the waist where he sat as she unwound her legs behind him to stand.

“God. Eat much?” she snarked at him.

He sat up, relieved at the lack of a human body behind him in the empty chair. Crossing the room, Rey shimmied out of the sweatpants beneath her party dress, tugging them down roughly around her calves, toeing them off, and kicking them haphazardly across the room.

“What?” she demanded, seeing him gawking.

His mouth hung open slightly, his eyebrows pushed comically high.

“I’m going downstairs to the fancy party to find you some food, I’m not going to run around in front of all those rich, old people in sweats.”

She pulled her heels on again, straightening her skirt, swishing out of the room, closing the door to the den with a distinct click, leaving Ben to drop his head in his hands with a groan.

_She’s going to be the death of me. I’m going to die, and I am going straight to hell when I do._

******

Rey returned with a considerable haul. Her arms were filled with a huge tub of popcorn, a six-pack of Dr. Pepper, and a plate with a dozen individually paper-wrapped dessert offerings, the cream puffs and tiramisu pieces overflowing the plate’s gilded edges.

Ben had started clicking through the TV channels and had centered his breathing again while Rey has been gone, happy to be distracted by the noise and the party noise downstairs, but Rey and a plate of desserts pulled him in like a magnet immediately, and he cleared his throat.
“Good God,” he managed.

“Yeah, I know. Everything looked good,” she said.

Kicking her shoes off, she deposited the food on the ottoman before kneeling beside it.

She leaned over and popped a creme puff into her mouth, opening a can of soda while she ate. Tipping her head back to take a long drink, she wiped at the corner of her mouth with her index finger.

Ben leaned back further into the couch, lacing his hands over his stomach and took a deep breath.

“So,” he started, deciding that concentrating on watching Rey eat decadent desserts sitting there on her knees while dressed like a pastel confection might kill him, deciding even talking using actual words would be easier. “What’s the plan after high school?”

Rey rolled her eyes at him, and unwrapped the fluted paper edges of a mini cupcake, biting half of into her mouth.

“More school, I guess.”

“You don’t like school?”

“I like the beach. I like soccer. I like this cupcake. No, I do not like school, I just go to school.”

She finished the cupcake and hopped up from her knees to sit on the couch, one cushion from Ben. He trained his eyes on her, watches her without moving a muscle.

Maybe this is fine. I’m a grown man, I can control myself, control my thoughts. Maybe we can just sit here and talk.

“Do you like school?” she asked.

“I like doing well. I like accomplishing things, reaching goals. And I have a goal, so it feels gratifying to be nearing it, yes. What about you, do you have goals?”
Rey sighed and rolled her neck in a semi-circle backward dramatically.

“I don’t know,” she groaned. "I want to be on the water. I want to be happy. My goals are more like be enjoy life and never be too far from where I can dig my toes in the sand. Those aren’t really ‘goals.’”

Ben just watched her. She was unlike anyone at college he knew, anyone at medical school. Everyone he’d known for years had been driven, focused, cutthroat. She was authentic in the most endearing way, while unaware her unabashed love of life was refreshingly unique and engaging.

“Those are goals.”
She cocked her head at him with a doubtful look.

“They’re life-affirming and self-aware goals,” he assured her. "That’s actually very mature.”

“Well, I wish you’d tell my mother that. We have this ‘what are you going to do with your life, Mija?’ ‘I want you to get an education, Mija’ discussion every day, feels like.”

“You should get an education. Just one that helps you meet those goals.”

“Is this what they teach you in doctor-boy school way up north?”

Ben smirks. Done being serious, I see?

“Yes. They teach us about how to instruct young people about college choices, and about the dangers of sugary soda.”

Reaching for a Dr. Pepper and popping it open, he’d drunk half of it in one swig, grateful for the chance to wet his throat, parched with nerves.

“Okay, grandpa,” Rey rolled her eyes.
“That’s Dr. Grandpa to you, missy.”

Maybe emphasizing the age difference was a good thing, before they got too involved sharing food and information.

Rey shifted, leaning her body across Ben’s lap as she reached for the TV remote on the far arm of the couch, landing atop him. Her belly stretched across his lap, his hands shot above his head submissively, and he held his breath.

*I’m not doing anything, I’m not doing anything!*

She grabbed the remote and leaned back, balancing her hands using his thighs under her palms to right herself to seating.

“Get over there,” he told her, leaning sideways to kick her gently with the ball of his foot, shoving her away to the other end of the couch.

“What? I’m just going to find something good to watch, geez.”

Yeah, well, you just stay over there. Just… *stay,*” he reiterated, planting a throw pillow between them as a barrier, palms held up, nearly pleading.

“Okay, okay, relax,” she giggled, throwing a piece of popcorn at him.

Ben leaned back, sufficiently barricaded by the pillow and laced his hands behind his head, locking them safely away.

She was over there and he was over here, and maybe they could just co-exist for a few minutes.

“Catch,” she said, tossing a piece of popcorn at him.

He caught it just in time with his mouth without unlacing his hands from behind his head.

“Mmm. Thanks,” he crunched at her. “Turn something on already, you’re driving me nuts,” he said, gesturing to the TV as she clicked through channels, crushing the salty kernels between his teeth.
Rey flicked around until she settled on “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and they watched the old black and white film since it was Christmas, after all, and this felt as authentically seasonal to Ben as attending the stuffy party downstairs, watching Jimmy Stewart retrace his life.

Ben watched as George Bailey fell for the younger sister of his high school friend, and raised a family with her, and got stressed out and nearly lost everything.

He watched while Rey settled down and fell asleep around the time Clarence the angel showed up in the third act, her hand soft on top of her waist, her feet stretched into Ben’s lap haphazardly.

He argued with himself whether it was okay to rest his hands on her ankles in his lap, or keep them planted on the back of the couch, his head a jumble of arguments and indecision.

He wondered and waited and argued with himself until the movie ended, and he listened to the party downstairs disperse.

He slipped out of the den, heading to his room, gently dropping a throw blanket over Rey’s sleeping form on the couch before he left. He tucked her feet in at the end, grazing her toes with his fingertips so lightly she didn’t even flinch as he left the room.

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Introductions

Chapter Summary

welcome to present day.

Chapter Notes

thanks to my beta uselessenglishmajor who couldn't be more useful.

strawberrycupcake_hucklberrypie.tumblr.com

xo
Chapter 3

Introduction

April 2018
Three days, 2,540 miles, 16 podcasts, seven fast food stops and 83 gallons of gas later, Rey and Finn drove up to the iron gates at Organa-Solo estate in her six-year-old Hyundai Sonata.

As predicted, Finn had been successfully wowed by the drive up Long Beach Key, openly praising the homes they passed enough to sufficiently convince Rey she had not oversold the key’s beauty to her best friend.

She smiled, their cross-country trek from San Diego and the knowledge her mother was was on the grounds somewhere just down the lane, ready to welcome her home after so many years away filling her with joy.

Rolling to a stop, Rey depressed the button lowering the window completely, propping her elbow on the sill.

“Oi! Hux! Open up!” she shouted.

A mischievous grin cracking her face into a freshly energized smile.

The redheaded guard appeared, a slow smile creeping across his face as he recognized Rey.

“Rey! You’re back! Figured a klutz like yourself would’ve fallen into the Pacific by now.”

Hux would never let Rey forget she’d taken a tumble from the bed of a pickup outside the gates as a teenager, the result of too many beers around midnight when a friend got overzealous about hitting the gas.

“Yeah, yeah. Just let me go see my mama, would you?”

She rolled her eyes at him with a smile, anxious to head to the big house and squeeze up her tiny mother.

“As you wish, my lady.”

Hitting the button, he granted her access, and her heart sped up as she drove through the gates.
Thrilled to be drinking in the well-known drive again, and happier than she could’ve expressed to be beside her best friend, her face was a mask of enthusiastic bliss, while his was bona fide wonder.

It brought Rey endless joy to be sharing this part of her life with Finn, her closest and most loyal friend beside Rose, and she felt unique gratification, watching as her carefully-laid plans finally came to fruition before her eyes.

Ever since Rey had met Finn in Chicago at the Naval Training Center five years prior, she’d dreamed of this moment, introducing him to the place she grew up, the estate simply impossible to adequately described.

She had been best friends with him since she left home at 17, since their literal first day of Naval Training. They’d leaned on one another through their shoulder-to-shoulder stationing in San Diego, while transitioning to roommates, each after discharge from the Navy, and while she completed her Marine Engineering degree and Finn his nursing degree.

She’d never been able to convey sufficiently the splendor of the estate though, even when she wistfully stared at the chipping ceiling of their apartment in San Diego describing it to him. She’d detail the lush blanket of endless grass, the nests of extensive, flowering foliage nestled at the foot of massive palm trees, the chill of the serene swimming pool, and the scent of the breeze off the Gulf waters.

To have waited so long to share it, and watch him take it all in with gaping mouth, his gaze digesting it all in from the passenger seat beside her…she soared.

She pulled the car around the back of the house, nearest the back kitchen door and stepped outside, giving her car door a shove of finality as she slammed it. Languidly, she stretched her arms as high as possible to the clouds, and back to the earth again, skimming her toes with her fingertips, happy to be finished driving. She couldn’t imagine the next time she would want to take a road trip but, she knew it would not be anytime soon.

She grinned over the hood of the car, watching Finn stare wordlessly out past the expansive yard towards the Gulf. She knew the feeling of awe it inspired in her and she enjoyed watching it affect him the same way.

Pushing the bottom half of the Dutch door open, she called into the kitchen.

“Mama!”

She hopped around the kitchen with impatience until her tiny mother came streaking into the kitchen from the other end.
“Mija! Mi amor! Mi bebé! Ay! Welcome home, Mija, welcome home!”

Maz gripped Rey around the middle, murmuring her personal mix of English and Spanish endearments at her daughter, pulling back after a moment to remove her thick-lensed glasses to wipe her tears away with a kitchen towel she snatched from the counter.

Rey laughed and patted her mother’s face dry instead with her shaking hands, ignoring her own tears, too elated to pay attention.

Another round of introductions between her mother and Finn, and Rey finally caught her breath. The high of their arrival to the estate, the reunion with her mother and exhaustion of days of cross-country travel intersecting abruptly, and she found herself too slow to stifle a massive yawn.

“Mija, I’ve got rooms for you and Finn all set up already upstairs. You two need a nap before dinner, I know you do. Go up and I’ll wake you for dinner in a bit,” her mother said.

A maternal hand at each of their backs, Maz nudged Rey and Finn towards the staircase.

Finn continued to gawk as they made their way up the grand stairs, both of them smiling at one another as they reached the top.

“Well?” she prompted. “What do you think?”

Raising his eyebrows dramatically he challenged her.

“Are you kidding me with this question right now? Peanut, you know this house is ridiculous, come on.”

The door to The Turquoise Room stood open, the sublime four-poster bed calling Rey’s name from the hallway, where she spied her suitcase already deposited. She touched the fixed turquoise pendant hung from a silver chain at her neck, her totem representing this home, this room, this Gulf water, and she grinned as she entered.

It was almost a religious experience, almost like she deserved to enter.

Looking around at The Turquoise Room, hands clasped and fingers laced tight in front of her, Rey
took a sobering breath, letting the moment settle around her like a cape around her shoulders.

She was home.

It was worth cherishing the moment.

“Uh, Peanut, I love you and all, but where can I crash?”

Finn broke her trance, motioning to his own duffle bag, alongside hers. Someone must have brought their bags up and left them together, allowing them the opportunity to fight over rooms themselves.

“Oh, shoot. Yeah, there’s another room at the end of this hall, I’ll show you.”

She breezed past her friend into the hallway, her dreamy state persisting.

Finn twisted his hand into the double straps and flung his oversized, Navy-issue duffle bag over his shoulder, following her around the upstairs balcony to the far end of the hall.

Memories shouted to her with each footstep, the den calling loudest to her as she passed, remembering countless days of teasing and wrestling and movie-watching with the pair of brothers she’d known, each grown and moved away.

Nostalgia tweaked her heart, and she hurried past to show Finn his accommodations, sweeping her thoughts back to the present.

Devoid of the energy required to figure out anything further than where to crash, she fell face-first into the sumptuous bed. Her last thought registered it was exactly as comfy a bed as she recalled, and she surrendered to sleep in total privacy, the only sound in her ears the surf beyond the balcony.

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“Rey. Mija. Wake up.”

Maz sat at her daughter’s side, brushing the wisps of her chestnut hair from her pretty face as she woke her for dinner.

The sun was quickly setting beyond the Gulf, the final trails of hot pink and orange light sending
sparks across the waves before it retired completely.

This had been a particularly tiring day for them all. Rey had traveled so far, and Maz wasn’t used to cooking her homemade enchiladas for so very many people anymore, but they were her baby’s favorite, always had been, so tonight they were having enchiladas.

It was a wonder to Maz that Rey was here at all, they’d argued about it so often and so exhaustively. She was shocked at the relief that remained, having emptied every single worry, regret and fear out into the space between them, only to have seen it fill like a reservoir of love shared by herself and her child.

Her dementia diagnosis, though a long time coming, spurred the changes that culminated in Rey’s arrival, and though she’d spent the last several months wrestling with a burden of guilt she thought she’d break under, Rey’s presence was a relief so tremendous it outweighed her shame completely. Maz had been blessed with a perfectly wonderful daughter, the love of her life in fact, and it had never been truer.

“Mija,” Maz repeated, stroking Rey’s cheek.

“Mmmm?”

Rey murmured as she climbed down from a deep, late-afternoon sleep.

Staring at her young daughter, Maz mused about the wildly diverse life she’d led, though she could never have predicted it would have become so. The rough Mexico City streets of her childhood contrasted starkly with the idyllic Long Beach Key world of her adulthood, but every moment of Maz’s 68 years had brought her here, and she could not have been more content, not with a dozen children or a million dollars.

She had dear friends, a rewarding occupation, a darling daughter.

There was nothing else on earth she could want.

“Mija. You will wake up in the middle of the night hungry and sad that you missed out on enchiladas if you do not come eat dinner. Too many people in the house tonight to leave leftovers, and Han and Leia are home and asking for you. Come with me, mi amor.”

This time, her daughter rolled onto her back grinning, stretching lazily. Her right cheek bright red from compression, deep grooves from the patterned quilt beneath her leaving impressions on her face and arms, she arched her back and inhaled.

“I love your enchiladas.”
Rey hopped up from the bed with renewed zest, reaching for her mother’s arm, following her
stomach instintively to the scent of Mexican food.

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“Rey! Oh, let me see you! Oh my God, you are so beautiful!”

Leia squealed as she wrapped Rey in a tight squeeze and rocked them together, side-to-side in an
embrace.

Beside them, Han looked on sporting his usual smirking grin, chiding his wife.

“Alright, alright, Leia, you’ll suffocate her. Hey, little girl.”

He side-hugged Rey clumsily as soon as Leia released her.

Flanked by them, grinning more girlishly than a Navy veteran and recent college grad had any right
to, Rey walked between the pair towards the kitchen table where she glimpsed Finn already
cheerfully seated.

Han and Leia had moved Maz onto the estate around the time Rey had left for college several years
back under the guise of needing her around the estate more. Rey suspected they meant to offer her
companionship in Rey’s absence, and she’d often wondered whether they’d begun to speculate
about what they would all soon know to be Lewy Body Dementia.

Once Maz had been persuaded by Leia to move into the pink cottage at the far end of the orange
grove, a one-bedroom bungalow originally used by the migrant workers who tended the groves,
beautifully restored and a pale pink, the shade of a rose petal, Rey had begun to think of the estate as
her home, too.

She had begun calling Han and Leia by their first names around that time too, texting and calling
them often to discuss her mother’s mental status, and recently to plan her homecoming.

They had both been indispensable as Rey had navigated her transition to adulthood, giving advice
about schooling, career options, major out-of-state moves, all things which Rey hadn’t tackled
previously and her mother had little experience with, as well as a slowly decreasing ability to help
plan.

Rey knew Han marched towards Maz’s house every morning, retrieving her in time for breakfast in
the big kitchen she had run for so many years. He awaited Maz to start the coffee for him, and
escorted her home every evening he was in town, back to the pink cottage where made sure she was locked in, safe and sound.

Looking at both Han and Leia, Rey felt her heart swell with thankfulness, and she channeled it into a voracious appetite for dinner.

“Rey tells us you’re a nurse, Finn, is that right?”

Leia passed a glass pan of enchiladas counter-clockwise around the table towards Maz as she started the conversation.

“That’s right. Med-surg nurse. Typical night-shift vampire right here,” he affirmed with a nod.

Piling tortilla chips onto his plate, he passed the bowl to Rey.

“Are you two planning on living near the hospital then?” Han asked, knowing their plan for an apartment-hunting expedition soon.

“I wish you’d let us set you up in the yellow cottage, Rey,” Leia interrupted. “It would be so much more convenient to have you here instead of all the way off the key, and we have plenty of space. The yellow cottage is a two-bedroom you know, after all, and I know your mother would love it too, right Maz?”

Before Rey could answer, Han rebuffed his wife.

“Leia, they’re adults, let them decide where they want to live, for God’s sake.”

“I am letting them decide, thank you very much. I’m just offering an alternative. We just this moment got her back from all the way out in California, you really can’t blame me for wanting her to be on the property instead of clear across town.”

Rey just sat there in the white kitchen, reclining against a high backed chair she knew the feel of by heart, listening to them argue about what she ought to do. She grinned at Finn around a mouthful of chicken enchiladas, knowing her input wasn’t only unnecessary, it was also completely superfluous to the conversation.

He smiled back, understanding her to be loved and accepted here, his shoulders relaxing at the knowledge she seemed proud to be so.

A slam of the front door alerted them all to an arrival, and Rey wiped her mouth with her napkin as
Poe strolled into the kitchen holding the hand of a raven-haired beauty. Smiling warmly at everyone, a chorus of greetings going up all around her, Rey felt him move towards her end of the table as he surveyed them.

“No, no, don’t get up - don’t get up,” he shushed everyone, pausing to kiss his mother’s temple as he passed her chair.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “Rey Kanata. The prodigal daughter returns. How the hell are you, Mouse?”

Rey chuckled as she stood to hug him, and he pulled her close. Lifting her clear off the ground in a hug, he caught her hands in his when she stood before him again. Spreading her arms wide, holding them far from her sides, and standing back, he inspected her until Rey blushed.

“All grown up,” he intoned appreciatively.

Remembering himself, he dropped her hands and moved to his ignored dinner guest, introducing her to Rey.

“Rey, this is my fiancé, Jess. Jess, this is Rey.”

The two women carefully avoided the excuse to size one another up, politely shaking hands instead, cordially offering stiff smiles to one another.

Poe and Jess opted to perch on the bar stools at the kitchen island instead of the dinner table, giving Rey a chance to look them over studiously as she ate. Poe had the tiniest salt scattered throughout his black curls, something she’d never seen on him before. The dimples in his cheeks when he smiled were the same, though. The shirt sleeves of his light blue button-down dress shirt were rolled carefully to his elbows, his pressed khaki slacks and penny loafers and heavy leather watch touting his status as a young physician.

His manner was still light and playful, but he carried with him a weightier sense of confidence than in his youth. He had the self-awareness of an ambitious man, no longer the preening of a merely flirtatious boy.

Beside him, his fiancé looked mildly thorny, her limited smile plastered in place by practice as opposed to emotion. Her hair, admirably thick, stick-straight, black to her shoulders rested on her purple jewel-toned scrub top, a yellow gold crucifix hanging on a chain against her generous bosom. She looked unmistakably miserable.
“Poe, give your girlfriend some dinner,” Han told his son, standing to clear the table.

“My fiancé, Dad, and thanks, but we ate on the drive over.”

Dinner was finished, and Rey could feel if not hear the exhale of relief Jess breathed as she breezed out of the kitchen before the rest of them. Everyone else handed messy plates, drained glasses and empty pitchers of homemade red sangria towards the sink.

“Oh! Poe, this is my best friend, Finn. We were in the Navy together, and then roommates and...yeah. This is Finn.”

Stumbling to convey how important a friend he is, how significant a relationship theirs was to her, she hoped to remind Finn of his essential place in her life even amidst this extended quasi-family, anxious for all her scattered pieces to be connected seamlessly.

Rey knew it wouldn't escape Finn’s understanding who exactly he was meeting. He’d recognize Poe as a primary character of prominence in Rey’s childhood crush stories, since he’d heard them all a hundred times.

The two men shook hands, eyeing one another painstakingly, likely using more force then was strictly necessary to compete for alpha.

She rolled her eyes at them as she stepped down into the sunken formal living room where they each eventually joined Jess who was already planted there typing furiously on her phone, ignoring each adult filtering into the room.

Sitting on the stiff couch, Rey skimmed through her memories of the room.

The way it looked in the morning with the light streaming through the glass doors. The way it looked at Christmas with a massive tree in the corner. The way it looked at night with one table lamp always illuminated near an armchair for Han to escape to as he battled insomnia with scotch.

It seemed to fill her soul up with abundance to see so many people she cared about here now, and she couldn’t stop beaming.

A movement in what should have been the empty kitchen caught her eye, a figure dressed in head-
to-toe black entering the back kitchen door. Striding across the room towards the fridge so quickly it could only be one person, Rey almost leapt off the couch to approach him.

Sneaking into the kitchen behind him, Rey weighed her options.

His head was bent as he combed the shelves of the refrigerator, his right hand holding the door propped. He wore a black crew-neck, short sleeved t-shirt, biceps straining against the sleeves, tucked into black scrub pants tied at the waist.

Before she could miss the chance to surprise him, she spoke.

"Always with the food."

Giving an exaggerated sigh, she had finally settled on an opener.

She watched as Ben straightened to full height in front of the open fridge door, hand still on the handle. He slowly leaned back, turning his face to see her, a smile spreading over his face as he fully realized who had spoken.

A beat passed.

“Hi,” she said, more breathlessly than she would have preferred.

Her nerves melted helplessly as she felt herself liquefy under Ben Solo’s inscrutable gaze. She worried she’s given everything away in that one syllable, but what was done, was done.

“Hi yourself.”

A smirk pulling his mouth sideways, a gesture so familiar to Rey she feels it tick a box in her brain.

“When did you get here?” he asked.

Turning back to the fridge, he retrieved the leftover enchiladas before closing the door.

He grabbed a fork and scooped every remaining bite in the container onto a clean plate even though it’s clear his intentions were to eat every last bite, and Rey answered him as he moved to sit at a bar stool.

“This afternoon. We got in around three.”
“Who’s ‘we’?”

Looking at his plate, she watched a cloud pass in front of his eyes.

“Me and Finn. My best friend. And roommate. He’s here. Over there.”

She couldn’t quite recapture how easily she had introduced Finn to Poe, couldn’t seem to remember how to tell Ben much of anything, and it was because it did things to her brain being in a room with him again.

She stepped away to the fridge, giving herself a minute to roll her eyes.

_You are a grown-ass woman, Rey Kanata, not a breathless teenager. God. Grow up._

Yanking the door open she pulled out a beer, and spent a minute finding a bottle opener before popping the metal cap. She took a deep swig and placed it in front of Ben, and he reached for it, taking a long drink without hesitating.

“Take a hike, I’m about to ugly-eat,” he said as she climbed onto the stool beside him, treating her like he had when she was a child.

“Not a chance. I haven’t seen you in a million years,” she retorted, signaling to him that she definitely no longer was one.

He smiled down at his food and dug into it in a way only a man who had been on his feet in surgery since dawn truly could.

While he ate, Rey drank him in like he was a waterfall, suddenly realizing she’d been parched.

She had most definitely forgotten how tall he was, that was the first thing to note, and his arms and chest definitely had not been this immense last time she’d seen him, that was also noteworthy.

He was sporting a goatee now and it suited him perfectly, she decided, admiring the same long, black wavy hair framing his mahogany brown eyes.
His voice went straight to her stomach, sending it into cartwheels, his mouth causing her eyes to glaze over in fascination.

*It’s even worse than it used to be. Damn it.*

Ben looked like the 6-foot-3-inch, living embodiment of heat, and she inched back into her chair trying to free herself from the tremendous magnetic pull of him.

*Good God.*

“So, tell me, Dr. Solo. Do people trust a doctor who dresses like the Grim Reaper?”

“I don’t know. So people trust a Navy veteran who dresses like a girl?”

“Oh,” she huffed, “I’m not a girl anymore, I can assure you.”

“Look a whole lot like a girl to me.”

He reached out and flicked her braid where it lay against her shoulder, touching her ear the slightest bit.

*An accident?*

“I am a Petty Officer Third Class, for your information.”

He smiled at her, and took another sip of the beer, before handing it to Rey and she did the same.

“Ok, you win, I’m impressed. You’re still dressed like an ice cream cone.”

“What? This?”
She’s not sure what he’s driving at.

*Is that bad? Is he insinuating she’s a baby?*

“And yes,” he said. “People trust a doctor dressed professionally in scrubs for an O.R. It’s part of the whole pesky ‘physician’ package.”

“Do any of those trusting people know you cheat at cards? And once lost an arm wrestling match to a girl?”

“Thought you weren’t a girl? And I don’t cheat at cards. That was one time and you dropped that card under the table suspiciously. I just picked it up.”

Rey felt antsy being nostalgic. It was fun reminiscing, but she was anxious for Ben to recognize she was a grown-up, damn it. It made her whiney remembering her childhood around him, and that wouldn’t help her convey maturity.

She hopped down to take a lap around the kitchen. All the tension was making her head light. Spying a cake plate under a glass dome piled high with frosted sugar cookies, she grabbed four and replaced the lid before sitting down again beside Ben.

“Gonna share?” he asked, wiping his mouth as he nodded to the cookies in her hand.

“Are you gonna drive home right away now or stick around here tonight?”

It was hitting her how much she’d missed him, the way her skin lit up and her heart felt wavy and her mind tripped happily along.

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Do you want a cookie?”

Holding the cookie in the air between them, elbow propped on the island, her question answered his.

“Yes, I want the cookie,” he said, looking at her.
He leaned forward to snatch it with his mouth, hands-free from where she held it, his eyes on hers.

“Yes, I want you to stay.”

Rey had carried a torch for Ben since she was a teenager. She winced, remembering dressing up like a frilly pink puff pastry for a party one year, how thrilled she’d been to spend that evening tossing popcorn into his mouth from across the room, laughing till she nearly peed her pants.

She remembered with a blush of humiliation begging her mother to find out when he was coming home from medical school in New York, feeling every bit a child still in high school, disappointed every time he declined coming home for a school break.

She’d listened intently hoping to overhear any tidbit of information about him shared between Han and Leia, eager to hear his name pop up in conversation.

She had been a child for so frustratingly long, so agonizingly long, always worrying she’d find out he’d gotten married before she could become a woman. She still wonders how he avoided that.

In the meantime, Rey had boyfriends as a teenager, of course. She was in the Navy for two years and college after that, and she’d given her virginity away at her choosing before she could “lose” it unceremoniously or unpredictably, not willing to die a virgin in case of untimely demise.

There’d never been anyone she could be with who made her feel less alone, though, except Finn, and that pairing was never happening. Finn, had been with her as she waded through the tumultuous years of post-high school meanderings beside her. He’d known her since she’d been a child, too, in a way.

She was no longer a child, though.

Rey was a grown-up and she knew who she was.

Shaking herself out of her head, she reached for Ben’s beer and finished it without asking.

Placing a hand on each of their chairs, Han appeared behind Ben and Rey, breaking the silence they’ve observed as Ben finished eating.
“We’re talking about taking the Falcon out on the water Saturday. Can you come up that day, Ben?”

“Let me check my schedule.”

Standing to take his plate to the sink, something in him closed off, and Rey thought she’d like to get back to their banter as fast as possible.

“We’ll do some skiing, some tubing, maybe take a grill to cook some burgers up. Whaddya say, little girl?”

“Oh, yes please!”

Satisfied, Han ambled back to the living room where everyone else was still chatting, shoes piled by the front door, Dizzy Gillespie filtering through the Surround Sound.

Rey stalled.

She’d wait to see where Ben was heading before deciding what to do next, but he was still rinsing his plate at the sink, and that left her suddenly confounded. Fidgeting with the hem of her tan, cotton skirt at her fingertips, annoyed with herself for acting so juvenile she crossed her arms, yanking at her white fitted tank top which puckered as she squirmed.

_I’m not a child. I’m nobody’s girlfriend. I am one single, strong woman and I need to pull myself together._

Her seating choices all signified complex dynamics as she entered the living room.

Ben, with the advantage of his long legs beat her to the couch she had vacated earlier, making himself comfortable, and he whispered at her across the room, making eye contact with her.

“Rey.”

He nodded at the place beside him, beckoning her.

He said her name and her annoyance lifted, replaced with a weightless glee so palpable she felt like she was floating.
She settled onto the couch close to Ben because she damn well wanted to, acutely aware of his presence, every cell in her body tuned to him.

Nervously she crossed and uncrossed her legs, trying to decide how to be, how to think straight when she saw Ben look down at her fidgeting, sending her something of a secret smile and her brain and body both relaxed.

Finally, she pulled her knees underneath her, willing herself to brush off the feeling of self-consciousness, to be the grown-up she knew herself to be.

She looked down at her lap, remembering again the pink confection she wore to the party, the giddy sense she’d had when she’d picked it out at the mall. She recalls fondly how late she’d stayed up watching a movie with Ben that night, and how she’d fallen asleep with her feet in his lap on the couch. She’d woken up happy the next morning, never having attended her first estate Christmas party after all.

She thought about the fact she was wearing far less fancy clothing now, but she was still as thrilled to be this near him.

A child was the last thing she wanted to feel like as she sat beside Ben, and as she caught the scent of his cologne, spicy and masculine, she tucked her hands under her shins. They were safest there until she could feel more like herself.

When she finally heard the room’s noise leak back into her mind, she looked over at Ben, her head clearing. With all the gratitude she felt for her good fortune at being a completely unattached, single, adult person at the same time as him, she smiled back.

“What took you so long to come home?” he asked her so quietly, no one else could have possibly heard.

She stared at him with wide eyes.

“What took you so long to come home?”

This was familiar, Ben asking her to talk, and tell him about herself. This, she knew how to do. This made her feel like Rey.

Her smile brightened and she leaned into him as she found her voice, and they introduced themselves to one another.
Neither Rey nor Ben noticed their mothers, seated at opposite ends of the living room in matching wingback armchairs, tastefully upholstered in cream-colored linen, or how they each silently observed Rey and Ben sitting on the slipcovered sage couch between them.

Over the rim of their wine glasses, each of them sat inspecting the body language of their children. They made note of Ben’s posture of implied dominance, his legs spread out wide in front of him, arms spanning the back of the couch, and of Rey’s joyful leisure, knees pulled beneath her, angled distinctly towards Ben.

Both of seemed them completely oblivious to the conversation going on around them, planning Saturday’s excursion on the Falcon, lost to themselves.

The two women watched as their children smiled at one another secretly, heads tipped towards one another in a conversation they couldn’t overhear.

Their eyes each danced in interest as they observed.

The conversation the two women shared across the room, spoken with the wordlessly understood language of two women with 40 years’ worth of friendship between them was unmistakably comprehensive and extremely entertaining.
Imperceptible

Chapter Notes

welcome to UST, all.
xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter 4

Imperceptible

Working as a resident surgeon under Dr. Simon Snoke was a soul-crushing experience. Hands-
down, it was one of the hardest things Ben could fathom living through.

His rounds started at 4am at the hospital, seeing patients in their hospital rooms recovering from surgery who were on Dr. Snoke’s service. He played go-between for the patients and his attending physician, translating Snoke’s instructions to his patients, and then their inquiries back to him.

It was a constant merry-go-round of incessant demands.

Rounds completed, Dr. Ben Solo would find himself meeting pre-op patients in holding. Shaking hands, he’d reassure them before scrubbing in and entering the O.R. for the day, where he would stand and assist in any number of surgical procedures, all of which he was expected to do the grunt work for.

After the surgeries were done and the board cleared, he would round again, discharging any patients well enough to go home. Sometimes he'd stay even longer to write new orders for anyone newly admitted to Snoke’s service, and every 5 nights was a special treat when he’d spend the entire night at the hospital snatching whatever scraps of rest he could - five minutes here, 40 minutes there.

Jumping up out of sleep with his heart pounding erratically when his phone alerted him to come see a new patient in the E.R., he was accustomed to residency already.

He only had five more years of this to go.

Last night was a rare exception to the schedule, a night when he walked away free after his cases were wrapped up by 5 pm, still energized enough to drive to his folks’ house for dinner two hours north on the key.

He’d missed a few calls from his mom the last couple weeks, even saw the first line of a couple of texts from her, but his life zooming past him the way it did, he hadn’t taken the time to actually open and read them, so hopefully coming home unexpectedly for the night would placate her.

The sun still mercifully hung in the sky like a flaming orange beach ball, bright enough for Ben to use his sun visor as he drove, the stress of the day crushed under his tires with every rotation of the wheels against the pavement.

He chewed up the highway, leaving the hospital and all that went with it further behind him with every mile.

He would miss dinner, but Maz probably left food in the fridge for him, and she always baked something sweet, sliced up and cellophane-wrapped he could take on his drive home after.

He hadn’t been home in a month, so this would be a great break from the grueling schedule he was keeping.

By the time he pulled into the gravel lane it was darkening outside, and he slipped inside the kitchen like a thief. He planned to ransack the kitchen, maybe even avoid everyone till morning.
He intended to sleep well in his room at the big house, and hopefully feel like a normal human again by daybreak.

Maybe if he’d read those texts or taken those calls from his mom the last couple weeks he would have been more prepared. Maybe he could have taken a shower or brushed his teeth or pulled a brush through his hair or put on more deodorant before coming into the house. Maybe he would have been prepared for whatever the _fuck_ his heart did when he heard her voice, even before he turned and saw her.

As it was, he had _not_ been prepared.

He heard her, just a note of her, and he froze.

The ponytail-sporting tomboy she was as a pre-teen was long gone, as well as the cherub-faced picture of temptation she’d been as a teenager. The creature who stood before him now used that girl’s voice but, she was a stranger to him.

She glowed even in the kitchen’s canned lighting, the static retained in her hair causing every strand to light up individually like firelight, pulled away from her face so that her eyes sparkled like jewels. Her smile looked like a Christmas gift wrapped with his fucking name on the tag, her face like someone had reached into his subconscious and drawn her to his personal preferences.

She wore a fitted, white tank top, lace-edged and gathered at the center, accentuating her curves, a tan skirt swinging above her knees, cinched up on the side into a knot, showing off how tiny she was. She was barefoot because _of course_, she was.

As she came closer he noticed her freckles scattered right where he had left them, right where he remerbered them scattered across her nose and cheeks. A single aqua jewel rest against the hollow in her throat on a delicate chain, endless rows of colorful bracelets lining her slim arms.

After years of denying himself access to her, compounded by the endless days of the blood, soap, stitches, hospitals, and scrubs that made up his job, Rey looked like some sort of angelic mermaid warrior to him.

A luminous, strong, imaginary, beautiful thing had shown up on his Gulf shoreline again, after years of pushing her from his subconscious as hard as a man could. Ben had fought the attraction to her so hard, he’d shunned his parents house for a solid year and a half at one point, waiting for her to graduate and leave. He'd been sure the draw would fade for him once she was gone somewhere far away at college.

Wrong, _dumbass_.

Wrong, dumbass.
He’d had never wanted to consume calories more in his life more than the enchiladas before him.

He needed to get himself some brain food, calm his swirling gut, give his hands an occupation to busy himself so he didn’t scoop her into his arms as soon as he heard her voice, dragging her to his lair like a starved beast.

He would not miss the chance to shower yesterday’s work shift away today though, jumping into the shower adjacent to his bedroom by 5:30 am. He’d long since outgrown the ability to sleep past dawn, his body’s clockwork viciously hardwired for his daily routine.

Images of last night played through his mind while he shampooed his hair. Rey’s laughter at his teasing, the depth of mystery her eyes held, the scent of peaches still her signature scent wafting towards him whenever she moved, salve for every, single day he’d missed having her in his life the last six years.

Once Jess had left for the night Poe had relaxed, per the norm, and after the old people had turned in for the night, Finn and Poe had stayed up far past midnight with them. Talking and laughing, they took turns regaling one another with stories of their lives, splitting a bottle of Fireball whiskey four ways.

Eventually, Poe and Finn made their way to the floor of the den in front of Ben and Rey on the couch, turning on a movie to enjoy the speaker system, at Poe’s insistence. Ben had eaten up the sensation of being a teenager again, but better this time because Rey was his peer now, his age.

Once he’d changed out of his scrubs and felt like a real person again, instead of a bottom-of-the-totem-pole resident doctor, Rey had crawled beside him on the couch. Curling herself closer and closer to him, so gradually he’d wondered whether he was imagining it, she’d finally reached for his hand and laced her fingers with his, laying her head on his shoulder. Her feet propped beside his on the same ottoman, he heard her sigh.

Both her hands were on him, one laced with his fingers, one circling his forearm.

Rey’s hands were on him.

He nearly panicked.

The old instinct to retreat, push her away, distance himself for both their sakes flamed to life. The ghost of his impulse to flee was so strong, he had to coach himself through hand-holding like he was a 14-year-old again. He was so used to disciplining himself to resist her, the realization he no longer needed to was mind-boggling.

He could so sharply recall being in the same room with her years ago, trying so hard to manage his thoughts and resist her sweetness. Being able to sink into her presence now, feel her hand in his, touching him was unreal.
Maybe she would have changed her mind in the morning. Maybe she would regret last night's act of impulsivity. Maybe he would have to go back to giving her space, drawing on years of experience to give her a wide berth.

With their hands palm to palm, fingers intertwined last night though, Ben had given himself permission to soak her up like a dry sponge. With Poe and Finn unsuspecting from their place facing the movie, his eyes followed her as she watched TV. The years of her absence that had left a rift stitched together with every breath he watched her take, better sewing work than any he’d ever done in the O.R.

Ben couldn’t help smiling to himself as he towed off, dressing and making his way downstairs. He forced himself to slow his routine, aware it was still far too early to wake as far as everyone else was concerned.

Sweets always his greatest personal vice, he helped himself to a fresh cup of coffee in the kitchen, adding cream and sugar generously. Taking advantage of the backyard view of the water like he often did at home, he walked through the back French doors carrying his coffee, pushing his damp hair back with his hand. Listening to the waves and the seagulls greet the day, he breathed the cooler air in, before it steamed later in the day. It was still dark at 6:10, the sun not yet present on the horizon.

This would be a pretty light show.

His heart skipped a beat when he recognized Rey’s slight outline seated at the edge of the property. Her legs disappearing over the ledge, her toes likely didn't even reach the Gulf water that lapped at the concrete seawall she sat on.

Ben replayed all last night’s moments quickly again as he approached her, watching the wind catch wisps of hair fallen free from the bun where it was up on her crown. He needed to confirm to himself he had neither exaggerated, nor imagined the night before as he sipped his coffee to to ground himself.

She had reached for him. She hadn't rejected him. She was finally an adult.

And she was here.

Home.

He hadn’t imagined or exaggerated that much.

Steeling himself in case he was wrong about it all anyway, he finished walking towards her and sat on the dewy grass a few inches away, close enough to intentionally seeking her, far enough to offer
her an escape if she didn’t want him touching her anymore.

He wished he’d brought her a cup of coffee, too.

*Why didn’t you, when you saw she was out here?*

She turned to see him and looked happy to see him, and Ben stopped thinking altogether.

“How are you up so early?”

*And how can you look this beautiful so early in the morning?*

“Think my internal clock is off. That nap yesterday screwed me up, I guess.”

*There’s a hint of something tinting her voice. Exhaustion? Or melancholy?*

“What about you?” she asked. “Why are you up already? We were up so late last night.”

“My body revolts if I try to sleep past 6. It’s sort of a curse. I need coffee, or I become intolerable.”

“Same.”

Something was amiss, he felt it acutely. She was distracted or maybe dismayed. Tempted to overreact, he worried it must be regret over her actions with him last night, innocent though they were.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he probed, causing her to look right at him.

He had to know right now what was wrong so he could shut himself down before he got carried away wanting her, if need be.

“How do you know something’s wrong?”

“Rey. Come on. What is it? Tell me.”

She gazed past him out to sea. The sun started to color the sky behind her, though it still teased the skyline. It brightened an inky indigo blue to violet and then golden in the clouds, the waves lightening from black to gunmetal gray.

He sipped his coffee and waited, watching her face as the breeze blew strands of hair around her lips gently.
She hadn't answered, so he pressed one last time, nervous whatever it was must be his fault somehow.

“Hey,” he said gently. "Tell me. What’s wrong?”

Tears welled up, spilling down her cheeks as she sat, gazing at the water. Unsure what to do, he held still and took a worried breath.

“I…I’m emotional, you know? Just about…a lot of things, really.”

She sniffled and wiped at tears while Ben watched helplessly. His heart broke as he recalled the last time he’d seen her cry, frustrated he found himself watching again, powerless to fix it for her.

The sky continued to intensify, orange and pink streaks highlighting the clouds just before the sun arrived.

“I just moved. Like literally, yesterday I just moved cross-country," she explained, eyes on the sunrise. "I’m tired. And my sleep schedule is shot to hell, and my head is killing me. I have to find an apartment. My mother is sick. I’m tense about starting a new job. I’m exhausted and I’m emotional and I’m a mess. And I’m so sorry I’m dumping all this on you.”

She finished her emotional inventory with a sadly huffed apology.

Ben reached up to wipe some tears from her cheek, his hand to cradling the back of her head. His fingers slipped into the strands of her hair where they’re pulled into the bun. Looking at her, feeling her head loll backward, her eyes sliding closed, his heart eased as he watched her sniffle, but stop crying. He held the full weight of her head in his hand, and before he could stop himself, he caught the next thought to pass on his brain’s ticker tape, delivering it to her out loud.

“God, you’re like a dream.”

It might have made little sense to her, considering she’d just emptied the contents of her fears as if she’d dumped a purse out on the grass between them, but it was what he’d landed on, and it was the truth.

She could be miserable or happy or whatever the hell she needed to be, he was just amazed he got to be the man next to her, allowed to be there, the one she was with.

It must not have been the worst thing to say, because Rey tipped her head back further into his hand, laughing through tears. Ben stored it all away in his files permanently. Rey’s laughter, her drying tears, the balmy breeze, the sun rising like a brilliant disk setting the sky on fire in a thousand shades of yellow.

Knowing he couldn't fix much for her, but aware he could address at least some of what ailed her, he
called upon the parts of his brain that diagnosed and treated people for a living. Standing to his feet, he offered her the hand not holding his coffee mug.

“C’mere,” he suggested quietly.

She stood and slipped her left hand into his like last night, lacing her fingers between his where they belonged. Bringing her right hand across her body, she held his forearm as it swung between them, her head bobbing on his shoulder as they slowly headed back to the house.

His father sat on the back lanai reading a newspaper, and Ben saw him watch their approach over the top of his reading glasses as they crossed the lawn.

“Morning,” Han muttered as they entered the porch.

Rey held fast to Ben’s hand in both her own, but leaned down to kiss Han’s cheek wordlessly. Ben said absolutely nothing.

Let his dad use context clues to figure this one out.

He pulled Rey to the kitchen where he fished two Advil from a bottle, filling a glass with water from the dispenser in the fridge door, cool and fast. Neither said a word as she obediently drank down the pain relievers, and as soon as she was done he pulled her upstairs.

The whole damn place smells like peaches, he mused as he led her to lay down in her room.

Catching his hand, she pulled him to sit at the side of her bed. He tucked a chenille blanket around her shoulders, brushing the fallen strands of hair away from her neck the sea breeze had pulled from her bun, marveling at how unbearably soft she was.

A dream. A dreamy mermaid goddess.

“Ben, I missed you. I missed you like crazy.”

“I missed you, too. I’ve missed you for so long, Rey.”

They stared at each other without speaking, and afraid he was about to start looking at her lips, he moved to leave.

“Sleep. Sleep first, solutions later.”

She closed her eyes peacefully, and he watched as she drifted.
His week happened.

That was the best thing he could say about it. Neither fast nor slow, not fantastical nor particularly hellacious, it was just a week. Something to endure until he could find time to get the hell out of there and back to Rey.

She was a drug, and no matter how much he tried to hold onto the residue of joy from their time last weekend, he’d sucked all the juice out of it already. His normal life pumped him full of the same drab cocktail of work and fatigue until his world went back to basic grey.

*Was it always like that? Why would I choose to lead a life like that? Was it like that before Rey came home?*

He couldn’t remember.

The days poured back and forth, rotating into each other, keeping his life churning if not excitedly at least efficiently towards Saturday. Ben retained it for himself as something of a carrot on the end of a stick, the ball Cinderella may attend if all the work got finished in time.

By Thursday, he’d already put in a 71-hour work week, and he used the online scheduling program shared among staff to ask a fellow surgical resident to work his Saturday shift.

It was a long shot, and Dr. Snoke would lose his shit when he found out, but Ben was owed plenty of favors by many people.

He’s never had need of cooperation from peers in the past, having never wanted anything as badly as Rey before, so he almost couldn’t believe it when his phone illuminated after midnight, alerting him the shift had been covered.

He would be off all day Saturday.

His first thought was to tell Rey.

It was late though, past midnight. He reasoned with himself she’d see it in the morning, even if she was asleep, and he sent her a text anyway, too shocked at his great luck to stop himself.

To: Rey  
From: Ben  
12:31 am
Taking the day off Saturday.
Boat day still a go?

That’s friendly but not pushy, right?
He would still give her an escape, careful never to assume or insinuate too openly.

She texted back immediately.

To: Ben
From: Rey
12:32 am
Why do you live so far away?
Why do you work so much?
When can you be here?

Can’t give a single straight answer, can she?

He smirked into the dark of his bedroom. Propped on one elbow in bed, he adjusted to respond more boldly.

To: Rey
From: Ben
12:33 am
I’ve never been so tempted to speed recklessly.
I get off late Friday.

To: Ben
From: Rey
12:34 am
Technically, it’s already Friday.
You’ll be home today.
Hurry.

To: Rey
From: Ben
12:35 am
You have no idea.

******
His first thought when Han saw Ben and Rey holding hands like a couple of lovebirds walking up from the sunrise in the yard was a general sense of well, what the fuck do we have here. Quickly, it was morphing more into listen kid, you’d better have a good goddamn plan.

He’d surveyed the whole sunrise situation, looked at Ben’s face and realized pretty quickly that kid was well and truly fucked. Han had lived long enough, and knew Ben well enough to see he was done for.

That little girl had him hook, line and sinker and you’d be a blind man not to see it.

He’d thought with dread after they’d gone in the house what a perfect mess of a clusterfuck he was may end up with on his hands if their thing went sideways.

Finally, he moved onto amusement at the unmistakable glint of rebellion in his kid’s eye, the one that wasn’t asking permission or forgiveness.

That last look of Ben’s was like a mirror for him, and Han couldn’t decide whether to smile and slap him on the back, or groan and go back to bed.

He stopped at the door of the upstairs den, knowing no one would hear him. The TV was so goddamned loud in those speakers Poe installed, it was like walking into the movie instead of just watching it. Standing still, he examined the scene before him.

They were both asleep. They’d spent the entire evening orbiting each other. He'd seen them enough tonight since Ben came up from Ft. Wells after work, ready for a day on the Falcon tomorrow, and now it was the middle of the goddamn night, and they were still wrapped around each other up here in the den.

Han had been raising his two boys for nearly 30 years, plus he was a man with his own ancient memories tucked in there somewhere too, so nobody could convince him this knucklehead son of his on that couch knew what the hell he was doing. Han was fairly certain he’d never seen his kid act anything like this about a girl before, though.

No, he was completely certain.

He padded gently into the room, looking for the TV remote.

The TV was what had originally brought him upstairs. Sitting downstairs drinking Maker’s Mark in the living room for a few minutes, he was going nuts listening to how loud the goddamn movie was, and came to investigate.

Stepping towards them, he paused to look at the two sleeping idiots, trying to figure out what he could from the scene they’d left him to decipher. They were both legitimately asleep, they weren’t faking it, but he’d bet they’d wake pretty quickly if he turned the blasted TV off, so he waited.

The remote had fallen from Ben’s hand onto the ground.

Those two kids were twisted right into each other like a two-person pretzel, fast asleep on the couch like there weren’t about two dozen fucking beds in the house.

Ben’s head lay cushioned on his bicep. That would definitely be stiff in the morning, that’d hurt like hell. His back was pressed into the couch, so good luck trying to reposition.
Rey was turned all the goddamned way away from the screaming TV, facing Ben completely. Her hand pulled his t-shirt into her fist at his chest, almost like she’d been fighting him. Her middle pulled flat up against Ben’s, his hand trapped her hip there, and both sets of their legs were a messy, jumbled pile he couldn't even make out.

No alcohol around, nobody else here, not any signs they’d been messing around, God forbid. Please, dear God in heaven, he wouldn’t want to know if they had been. Holy Mother, please, no.

Rey was a sweet girl, always had been, and Han couldn’t abide the thought of seeing her getting hurt. Not to mention ol’ Maz, and what Rey being upset would do to her. Then again, Ben was his kid, his little boy, and he’d always had a tender side. Even though Han has epically fucked up that relationship since day one, he didn’t want to see Ben dismantled.

Ben would not do well with dismantling, no more than he himself would handle Leia tearing him apart. Han would crumble to dust if that ever happened, and no matter what he says, Ben was a lot like him. He’d crumble in the right woman’s hands, too.

Han wondered if Rey was the right woman for Ben.

He’d been wondering about the whole damn thing since he walked up behind them in the kitchen the first night Rey was home, and caught them passing the same beer back and forth.

He had no idea how to reckon all this bullshit.

Sighing, he let the TV go on booming, and went downstairs to get into bed beside Leia, suddenly very tired.

Bullshit is tiring.

******

It was only 8 am and Ben was already annoyed.

The happy buzz he woke with after holding Rey in his arms all night went up like smoke when he heard her laughing and talking with Poe down the hall before he’d even opened his eyes. It was unfair to ask him to act charitably that early in the morning with a major crick in his neck, without his coffee and his girl nowhere near close enough.

He headed to the bathroom and showered in record time, pulling on a long-sleeved black rash guard above floral board shorts that reached his knees, pulling on a baseball cap over his hair while it was still wet. He couldn't get to the coffee fast enough.

He needed something to ward off his headache, and fast.

Heading downstairs he caught sight of Rey seated on the edge of Poe’s bed still laughing her ass off, watching him do something wildly hilarious, apparently. Too irritated to be troubled to find out what was so funny, she caught his eye as he chose to skip the smile back, marching downstairs bitterly instead.
While pouring his coffee, Rey reached from behind him, hugging him lightly around the middle. He told himself his hands were full fixing his coffee and that’s why he didn’t squeeze her arm around his waist, or reach behind to hold her, or do what he’d really prefer and turn around and kiss her silly. In reality, he was royally annoyed she essentially left him in bed to go find Poe.

*It’s always Poe, isn’t it? That’s who she wanted, that’s who got her all worked up when she was a kid, that’s who she headed off to as soon as he showed up without his bitch fiancé, after all. It’s always Poe for everyone, who am I kidding? No reason for her to be any different.*

He’d been fooling himself thinking she’d choose him over Poe.

Not responding to her arms wrapped around him, her cheek pressed to his back, the way she breathed him in through his shirt, she dropped her arms and stepped back, which he immediately regreted.

He had to get the goddamned coffee on board to take the edge off before his head exploded with his headache. He definitely did not get enough sleep last night, and he’d woken way too late.

Poe sauntered into the kitchen like he was fucking lord of the manor or something, and Finn beside him, way too chipper for Ben’s taste. Both of them were already dressed for the boat, too, and Ben tried not to scowl.

Rey had moved to help her mother at the other end of the kitchen, together packing a massive rolling cooler with food. Everyone took turns filtering in and out of the kitchen over the next thirty minutes while Ben sat on a bar stool nursing his coffee, letting the caffeine make him sensible, tasting the sweetness of the sugar on his tongue, washing his bitterness away with the cream.

By the time Han came to tell them to load up, his headache had dissipated substantially, feeling considerably less dark. He may not murder his brother after all, hopefully just torture him a little if the situation presented itself.

Outside, Jess and another woman had already arrived. Their day aboard the Falcon had swollen to a sizable group outing instead of a family affair, and once Chewie showed up they were rolling eight deep. Deciding to take two cars to the marina, Poe, and Han opted to drive, their cars being the biggest to transport eight adults, food, towels, the whole kit and kaboodle.

While they organized cars, people and plans, Ben fought his growing aggravation.

This was a slow death by logistics, and it was the sort of nonsense that made him lose his shit.

He looked down to see Rey talking to the woman he didn't recognize before she introduced herself as Rose.
“I’m Rose. I’m Rey’s best friend. Since 3rd grade. So, I know who you are. You know who I am?”

She shook his hand firmly, and maybe that was a threat and maybe it wasn’t, he couldn’t tell. He might like this person in spite of himself. He’d reserve the right to decide later.

Rose surveyed Ben unabashedly, scanning him head to toe with genuine thoughtfulness before cutting her eyes to the side.

“Yep. I get it.” she announced, nodding to Rey.

*This has been what…a test? And I've passed?*

*Unclear.*

Realizing in a panic as supplies disappeared into vehicles he may potentially be separated from Rey on the drive, further regretting his choice to ignore her in the kitchen, Ben wrapped an arm around her waist. His hands took in every inch of bare skin of her bikini-exposed midriff he could reach, and he hoisted her up onto his hip like a laundry basket, walking towards Han’s Suburban.

She waved her arms and legs frantically insisting he put her down, and he’d never been so thankful for entertainment. He smiled for the first time since he'd woken, and resisted the urge to smack her ass as she climbed into the truck in front of his face.

Crawling all the way to the third row, Ben crowded her intentionally, seated beside her. He could barely fold himself back there, but it was worth it. He had Rey pleasantly cornered and he needed a fix of her.

She looked out the window even though they weren't moving yet.

“You're mad.”

“Well, that was rude, man. You felt me hugging you, and you ignored me.”

She wasn't wrong, and he knew it.

“I’m sorry. Rey, I’m sorry,” he told the back of her head. "Forgive me? Please?"

Slowly she turned and faced him, and he gulped her down with his eyes. The back of his hand brushed her hair behind the shoulder nearest him, his fingertips grazing her skin, as his hand landed on the back of her neck lightly.

She didn’t smile, but leaned into him before looking back out the window again, and it was enough. For the first time today, he could breathe.
Does this mean I breathe best when she’s in my arms?

He would bet a large amount of money that yes, it did mean that.

This is good. This will be a good day.

Ben actually loved going out on the boat. Sanded and salted, the splash of the spray in his face when he was on a wave runner, Ben loved it all. Pulling in a haul of fish he’d caught, being on his dad’s beautiful speedboat on a gorgeous day as they flew over the water, spinning hard and skipping over the waves they created. What could be better than doing that with Rey?

Her swimsuit was perfectly Rey, a sweetly tempting two-piece he knew was going to mess with him all day. Looking down at her he kicked himself, feeling like a dick for how he’d brushed her off that morning, struck again by how fucking lucky he was to be the one sitting beside her.

He didn’t want to waste a second he could have her eyes on his.

“Hey.”

She looked up at him expressionless, maybe still mad.

“You sleep ok last night?”

"Ben, there may be literally no better sleep for me than the kind I get in your arms.”

How does she do that? How does she leave me speechless?

“Can I get that in writing?”

She smiled and said nothing.

He continued.

“If I put it in writing, will you sign your name to it?”

He had wrangled a brighter mood from her now, and kept pushing.

“If I get you to sign it, do you need it notarized?”

She shoved him with her shoulder, smiling with teeth finally.
“I wish you’d make a habit of sleeping that well in my arms more often.”

“Don’t live a million miles away.”

“It’s really not a million, more like 90. Are you saying you won’t make the trip?”

“It feels like a million, and maybe I would if it involved something besides a couch and a crazy set of TV speakers.”

“Noted. Couch and speaker removal commencing immediately.”

Satisfied, Rey lowered her head to rest on his collarbone, her hand coming to land on his knee. Her eyelashes tickled his chest when she blinked through the material of his rash guard. He responded in kind, pulling her in tighter, both his arms circling her until his fingers laced together at her ribs, and he pressed a kiss to her hair, burying his nose there.

They stayed like that till they were parked at the marina, and everyone else has exited the Suburban.

******

What had been so promising an outing had proven to be a rollercoaster of a day, any way you sliced it.

By the time the vehicles parked back at the estate in the evening, sandy and bedraggled people poured out every door like two clown cars full of tired bodies. There were aspects of the day that had been enjoyable. The more mild troubles like forgotten items and a Coast Guard warning for not observing a posted speed limit were not a terrible inconvenience, but in general, Ben basically hated it.

The part right around mid-day when they’d dropped anchor at Sand Hill Crane Key, a tiny island they’d chosen to explore had provided a gorgeous sandbar. Crystal-clear water six inches deep so pretty you could lay down and float, fingers skimming the rippled, cool, fine sand beneath.

Ben had enjoyed it so much his spirits had lifted for a while.

He’d laid on the sandy beach flat on his back afterward, without a towel. Arms and legs flung wide, eyes closed, he invited the sun take a free shot at him.

Rey had come to lay beside him, and he’d turned his face to her, but resisted touching her, compelling his brain to do all the work. He studied her, committing to memory the way her eyes twinkled, the way he could see a fine top layer of sand shifting all the time around her, the way her pulse in her neck made him lustful to distraction.

Most of the day though, Ben spent tied in a knot. Every step he took, every choice he made, seemed to propel Rey towards Poe.

It didn’t matter that Poe was fucking engaged and his fiancé on the same boat, he spent his energy
flirting with Rey like it was going out of style. She was beside him, behind him, at one point falling, giggling into his lap when the boat turned hard, laughing themselves into a stupor all day. Every time he turned around his brother’s hands were on her, poking her in the side, grabbing her knee, tickling her waist while she begged him to stop, yanking her hair.

If Poe wasn’t bad enough, Finn seemed to be in competition with him for handsiest platonic friend because he was all over her, too.

It was like the universe had it in for Ben. It had handed him a miraculous day off work and time on the Falcon, beautiful weather, the prettiest girl ever, and two of the most touchy-feely men ever born to accompany them, and fuck if it hadn’t ruined his day.

He’d spent the day feeling like the ugly little brother of the bronzed Greek god again, feeling like Rey was off limits again, like it was the worst of all worlds converging. He’d mostly drove the boat, or sat with his dad and Chewie who were proving the best companions for the day which was absurd.

“What the hell?” his dad had commented under his breath, astonished at Poe brazenly flirting with Rey in front of Jess.

“You know how he is,” Ben grumbled with a sharp shrug.

He played it off casually for some reason while seething internally till he could combust.

The cherry on top of a particularly shitty sundae had beeb Poe maneuvering Rey into the passenger seat of his Range Rover while Ben was still getting the Falcon into the slip at the marina. He’d had no idea their vehicle had even left until he’d gotten to the Suburban, realizing somehow he’d been left with his dad, and Chewie for their ride home. Sandy, sticky, and boiling so intensely Ben felt like a cartoon character with steam shooting out of his ears, he’d been biding his time until he burst from the car.

As soon as his dad parked in the carport, he’d strode across the lawn as hard as he could wearing a scowl so severe it almost hurt. He threw down his hat so hard it bounced off the lounge chair, kicking off his shoes and diving into the pool as fast as possible. He was desperate to scream and thrash and kick till he drained his frustration.

The chill of the pool amplified exponentially by the heat trapped in his skin from a day in the sun, he gasped with the shock as he thrashed.

As he pushed and pulled himself across the pool over and over, he funneled his concentration into his form and speed. Chasing lap after lap, he used the whole length of the pool to bleed his anger.

Finally, sapped of rage, he wanted to be done. He wanted this day fucking over.

He hiked a leg onto the edge of the deep end, finally worn sufficiently out of breath from the sheer speed of the laps he’d swum, swinging his body out of the pool with a shake of his head to throw hair out of his face.
He was still deeply sandy. He'd still have to shower and scrub all the sugar-fine sand off his legs and feet, but at least he'd washed the frustration of the day off him and could hear himself think again.

It was still so bright outside he squinted as he walked towards the shallow end of the pool, weaving slightly as he tossed his wet hair from his eyes. Heading in the general direction of his discarded, sandy towel he felt a small hand yank his wrist backwards, hard.

It took him a second to register what had happening, he was so stuck in the white noise of his own head.

“Hey. Hey!”

Rey half-shouted at him in annoyance, yanking on him to command his attention.

He pulled up short, turning to see her sitting at the foot of a lounge chair where she’d apparently been perched, waiting for him to pass. Water dripped into his eyes as he looked at her silently. She was fairly fuming with outrage, he realized, nearly vibrating with it, and he was a little cowed in the face of her anger.

“What’s your deal, huh?”

She was still sand-covered, the finest layer of it covering every exposed inch of her. He took in her pinking shoulders, the bridge of her nose a touch too red, her eyelashes and hair clumped into separate sections from the saltwater. Her wetsuit worn over her lower half, unzipped and hanging from her waist only, her halter swimsuit top exposed, even her feet were still bare.

He stared into her eyes and then at the turquoise gem at her throat.

*Mermaid.*

Finally, he found his voice.

“What do you mean?” he asked, playing innocent even while knowing he’d been a dick to everyone.

He’d just been so damn disappointed their intimate outing had been turned into a circus. It was torture to watch both his brother and her good ol’ best pal, Finn, paw at her all day long. It had been all he could do just to steer the boat all day, let alone be friendly. That had felt like altogether too much to ask of him.

“What do I mean?! What I mean is, why are you treating me this way? Why are you treating *everyone* this way? You’ve pretty much been an asshole to me today, and I do not get it, Ben. Did you not want to come be with me today? Is that it?”
There was a part of him that wanted to play dumb.

There was a voice in his head telling him danger lay ahead. She was about to trap him into a declaration of some sort, and then use it against him as soon as he’d expressed it. She was likely to laugh at him.

Insecurity batted around inside his mind, the oldest one, that one told him he wasn't as valuable as his brother, that no one could want him when they had a better option available, and it was clear from his behavior Poe considered himself an option, Jess or no Jess.

Another voice elbowed past the old one, though.

It stepped up to the mic when Rey was near, telling him to act like her, to be brave, vulnerable, honest.

He didn't act much that way often, but maybe he'd get better at it with practice. Sitting down on the lounge chair beside her, he hung his head while he decided to bite the bullet.

“I’m sorry. I am. You haven’t done anything wrong. I swear. I’m just not…it’s just not easy for me…with a lot of people around. Nothing is. And this was,” he gestures widely, “a lot of people, in my opinion.”

When he bravely stole a look at her next to him, he saw her face had softened. All the anger died out as if he'd doused the fire in her eyes, and realizing his honesty had earned him that much forgiveness he went a step further.

“…People who all apparently couldn’t keep their goddamn hands off of you,” he finished, dropping his head again, and hunching his shoulders. It was a costly risk, but he had taken it.

There. It's out there. That's got to be clear, right?

She had to know his behavior was pure jealousy, based solely on the fact he was crazy for her. Surely that much was clear now.

It made him vulnerable, completely exposed, admitting to her that he couldn’t handle seeing anyone else’s hands on her - not her best friend, not his own brother, not anyone. That must indicate to her what he’d been wrestling with.

The pool water dripped off his bangs, falling onto the pavers of the pool deck below his feet. Bent watching each droplet dry where its fallen in the sun's intense heat, his knees spread and his elbows resting on them, he tried to get himself under control.

As he studied the pool deck, Rey’s painted toes appeared under his gaze.

She stood in front of him.

He looked up, blinded for a minute by the sun, by Rey, by the fact he was getting any alone time with her, and he felt her nudge his knees further apart with her own. She pushed each knee further away to make room for herself between them.

She closed the space until it was only inches, running her hands through his sopping wet hair.
Combing it with fingers as she grazed his scalp all the way to the back, over and over, she stood so close he saw each freckle, each eyelash, each sand grain on his skin. From this angle, he could smell the sea breeze on her. He could get lost like this, his head tilted back completely to look up at her, the sky a robin’s egg blue behind her.

“Where’s my Ben, huh? Will you send him back to me? I want my Ben.”

Her Ben.
She said it so softly, so wholeheartedly, so slowly he was hypnotized by her glittering eyes.

It wrecked him, the sentiment.
He was ruined. Destroyed.
*Her* Ben.

He could be *hers*.

All he could do was stare up at her, his neck hyper-extended while her eyes sparkled.
He was speechless now. He was putty in her hands, hopeless, gone.

“Do you feel it? Do you feel what I feel? *Do* you?” she asked urgently.

Her eyes imploring, she placed her right hand over his sternum, undoubtedly feeling his heart hammering under his wet rash guard.

He didn’t have any idea what it felt like from her perspective, but from where he sat, it felt like a goddamn legitimate cardiac event. His heart pounded so hard it felt like it was trying to escape his rib cage.

He would answer, but he was under her spell.
She was a mermaid witch goddess from heaven or maybe hell, Ben had no idea, but he was under her spell utterly.

He couldn’t find a single word in his head as he stared into her eyes, but he timidly brought his dumb hands up the back of her thighs, anchoring himself to her warm skin, pulling her imperceptibly closer to his body as he studied her response.
His fingers skimmed the gritty backs of her thighs as she stared down into his eyes. Her breath caught and his heart raced.

*Is she about to pull back?*
*Is this ok?*
*Have I pushed too far?*
*Am I imagining things?*

Maybe what he remembered from years ago was one-sided, maybe it still was. Maybe she was about to laugh at him, running back to Poe and Finn and Rose, gossiping about what a moron he was.
She didn’t pull away, though. She came a step closer.

Haltingly, she lowered her head, resting her forehead against his, bringing her nose to graze his gently.
His eyes slid closed.

Every place their bodies were in contact screamed at Ben in unison, his forehead, his nose, the back of his neck where her hands landed, his own hands still around the backs of her thighs, her skin sandy and burned under his fingers.
He squeezed her legs gently, muscles taut under his hands, making him boil with intentions and inspiration.

Every cell in his body urged him forward, testosterone and experience encouraging him to press up just the slightest, treat himself to her lips, finally discover how soft they really were. He could find out what she tasted like, see how far she’d let him press his luck, but this was Rey and he was Ben.

He’d spent too many years pushing this away, disciplining himself to knock it off, too many years wondering what she’d be like as a grown woman, and she was so much more than he would have let himself imagine if he’d even allowed himself that luxury.

To wind up here in this position now, to kiss her when 10 minutes ago she was pissed at him for being a jerk to her all day long...

Rey deserved endlessly more than that.

That was not how he wanted to remember their kiss.

Eyes closed, they breathed the same air back and forth, the moment suspended.

Behind him, the screen door squeaked open.

“Reyrey? Sorry, we need to head out and you’re our ride. Finn has to get ready for his night shift. Sorry. Again,” Rose called.

Rey had lifted her head from Ben’s to gaze across the grass at Rose as she beckoned her, and he opened his eyes to see her nod at Rose before looking back down at him. Slowly, he dropped his hands from her legs, and she backed away from him.

A chill immediately sets in as his body continued to recover from the pool water’s shocking cold, now lacking her body heat to balance him.

She looked a little lost as she turned to go, and that couldn't happen, he wasn’t about to let that happen. Draining the last dregs of his courage, he tugged her small fist to touch his chest again, right over his heart for three full heartbeats, sends her a smile, realizing he hadn’t smiled at her in hours. It felt good.
She smiled back once, quickly, and then she was gone lightning fast, disappeared into the house in
under a minute.

It would be 10 minutes longer before he found the strength to stand and follow her steps into the house, telling his family goodbye for the night, exiting through the front door to head to his waiting, stuffy car alone.

Two hours later, he’d pulled into the driveway in front of his condo, where he sat in his silent car. Engined killed, he was finally granted the opportunity to send her a text.

To: Rey
From: Ben
7:48 pm
Rey.
Yes.
Of course I do.
I feel it, too.

******

Chapter End Notes

thank you to my beautiful beta, uselessenglishmajor, whose incomparable "Free 2 Fall" in another Reylo AU is a joy.

Comments & Kudos are food *wink*
xox
strawberrycupcake_huckleberrypie.tumblr.com
Chapter Notes

*blows you a big kiss*
*have a chapter, Happy Friday!*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter 5

*Impractical*

To: Ben

From: Rey
9:22 am

See, THAT sleep wasn’t nearly as good.

Why weren’t you here when I fell asleep?

Why weren’t you here when I woke up?

To: Rey
From: Ben

11:50 am

Luckily, I was afforded precious little sleep before I came into work.

I didn’t want any of it without you here anyhow.

To: Ben
From: Rey

12:00 pm

Why can’t you quit your job and come home?

To: Ben
From: Rey

4:00 pm

When CAN you come home?

To: Ben
From: Rey

9:55 pm

Bennnnnnnnnn

I’m not even going to try to sleep without hearing from you.

To: Rey
From: Ben
10:11 pm

I can’t decide if you make my life torture or worth living.
You’re taking up head space I need for surgery.
You’re the best part of my day.

To: Ben
From: Rey
10:30 pm

THERE you are.
Good God, your job sucks.
I feel like you’re a galaxy away.

To: Rey
From: Ben
10:32 pm

Agreed.
Frustrating.

To: Ben
From: Rey
10:33 pm

I miss you WAY too much.
Quit making me such a hot fancy mess, would you?

To: Rey
From: Ben
10:34 pm

These are mixed messages you’re sending.
To: Ben
From: Rey
10:35 pm
Ben, I want you to come home.

To: Ben
From: Rey
10:35 pm
Clear enough?

To: Rey
From: Ben
10:38 pm
Rey, nothing on earth or beyond it could keep me away.
Also clear?

To: Ben
From: Rey
10:41 pm
Are you exhausted?
What time do you have to go to work?
Is there a schedule?
DOES IT EVER CHANGE?!

To: Rey
From: Ben
10:43 pm
1 - dead tired
To: Ben  
From: Rey  
10:45 pm  
Lord, go to sleep.  
I hope you know how sacrificial I’m being, telling you to stop texting when I’d rather monopolize you.

To: Rey  
From: Ben  
11:00 pm  
Hardly sacrificial.  
I’ll see you in about 30 seconds in my sleep anyway.

Chin to her chest, Rey scrolled back through her texts with Ben for the day just to reread them, just because she could. She’d grown cold in her drying swimsuit, her hair damp and stringy from swimming earlier that evening during sunset.

She’d sprinted upstairs holding a huge breath and jumped into bed, buried under the covers up to her hairline as soon as she’d gotten Ben’s text, anxious to respond fast so he’d see it.

She smiled to herself as she read through the texts twice.

She could almost hear his voice in his texts.

Almost, not quite.

She’d much prefer to hear every word with her own ears, proof he said them and meant them. She wanted more than this. She wanted him here in her bed, 200 lbs of heat and hands.

She wanted him to retaliate for putting her cold feet on him, to pull her over to his side of the bed, wrapping his ridiculously huge arm around her waist like a vice, wanted to feel him curled behind her protecting her from the dark, the cold, the unknown, the world, everything.

She’d never craved protection, at least not since she was seven, before she became a brown belt in tae kwon do, but Ben made her want to be covered up in him, heavier around her than this quilt, his voice more comforting than this stupid phone.
This was not enough.

She needed him here.

Home.

Feeling the end of her bed depress with the weight of a person, she pulled the covers down to her chin, hair flying haywire.

“Mouse, let’s get out of here for a while. Go find a club, get jiggy with it, go dance, get fucked up. C’mon, Finn’s down for it. What do you say?”

Poe shook her ankle under the covers back and forth, trying to talk her into leaving.

She didn’t want to leave.

She was cold to the bone and she’d like to take a hot shower and warm up thoroughly. A fun night sounded like being pathetic, reading her texts from Ben again, joining him in sleep even if he wasn’t beside her. She imagined him already asleep and it felt traitorous to still be awake when she could sense somehow he wasn’t.

“No way. I’m not leaving this house tonight,” she answered Poe, arms crossed over her chest.

“Reeeeyyyyy,” he whined, “come on. I need you.”

He used both hands, shaking both ankles, tossing his head back a little like a fit-throwing toddler to emphasize his statement.

“Not a chance. Go away. Go be jiggy without me.”

“Finn!” he hollered over his shoulder.

“Hey, why are you here, anyway?” she asked him.

Poe was a second-year surgical resident, same as Ben. Poe was here when his job was two hours due east, alongside Jess. He was here in her room on a Sunday night while Ben was at work right now, most definitely not sitting on the bed tugging her by the ankles, asking her to go clubbing. She couldn’t even picture him in that scenario anyhow, it was so outrageous.

If Ben were here right now she’d change into flannel pajamas pants and strategize a way into his arms. She’d crawl close enough she could breathe him in and smell nothing else but his manly goodness. She’d slide up beside him and lace her fingers into his, leaning their joined hands up against his chest like he had the other day while they were walking, right over his heart. She’d kiss his tempting lips and make him squirm, feeling his huge thighs under her hands through his jeans.

She’d be a thousand degrees warmer in seconds.

“ Took the week off,” Poe answered nonchalantly. "She won’t come. I can’t get her out of bed,” he
said as Finn entered the room.

“That’s normal,” Finn sighed. “Good luck. If she doesn’t want to do something, you’ll wear yourself out trying to talk her into it and she’ll still win.”

“I’m no fun,” she smiled, shrugging her shoulders.

Too restless to just lay there while the conversation went on, she jumped out of bed. Tossing the covers off herself completely, she headed for the bathroom, deaf to their requests. She wanted them out, frankly, wanted to be left alone to get ready for bed, alone with her thoughts about Ben, dirty and delicious.

Poe followed suit, jumping up and grabbed for her hips, pulling her ass against his crotch firmly, as he began dancing, grinding against her.

“Come on, foxy, let’s go dance. Shake what your mama gave you. Come on, come with us.”

He may have meant to prompt her to agree, to dance with him and find a nightclub where they could continue the dance, but it only served to piss her off. Rey wasn’t interested in being manhandled, not some cheerleader princess who could be pawed while vapidly giggling. She shoved him off with an aggressive thrust with her ass, disengaging him. Turning around to face him, she planted her hands on her hips.

His line of persuasion would not work on her.

“You two,” she started, pushing them each by the sternum towards the bedroom door, “go knock yourselves out. Go right ahead. I’m out.”

Telling them with the conversation was over, she drove them to the threshold, the subject closed.

“Alright, alright,” Poe said, palms facing her at eye level. "Next time. You're coming. Promise me.”

Both of the men are moved further backward out the door to her room, into the hallway where she wanted them.

“Maybe.”

“Pinky swear?”

"What are you, 12? Go away, I’m going to bed.”

“ ‘Night, Peanut,” Finn said.

“ ‘Night boys, have fun.”

Finally, she closed the door and locked it.

Done.

Entering her bathroom door, she peeled her nearly-dry swimsuit off, running the water in the shower as hot as possible. Her bare skin reminded her of Ben again, everything reminded her of Ben, and she gave over to it, leaning into it all dreamily as she stepped into the steamy shower.
Apartment hunting had been laborious and discouraging.

Rey was tempted to despair a little. With Finn as her roommate and partner in the endeavor, she was guaranteed not to lose heart. He was too good at cheering her up, too practiced at compensating for whatever she felt in excess, able to be the voice of optimism or sympathy, so she wasn't completely disheartened, but damn. That town was expensive.

Even the neighboring towns were expensive.

A two-bedroom apartment ran too rich for their blood, impractical for people of their age and means. It was definitely not what they had budgeted when they’d each taken jobs here in preparation for the move out from San Diego.

Finn had already begun his night shift nursing job at the medical center the week prior, working his three 12-hour shifts a week, sleeping at times so random Rey was sure she’d be meaner than a snake if she tried to exist on his schedule.

Her job hadn’t begun yet. The entire marina was closed for the month while staff took a break at the start of summer season before tourists arrived in mass.

With cash flow at a standstill, Rey wasn’t sure how to solve this situation, and though she was grateful to be crashing at the estate for free, able to see her mama whenever she wanted and soak up all the amenities greedily, she also didn’t want to spoil it acting entitled.

Rey tripped a little into the back door of the kitchen realizing she was a bit tipsy from her boozy lunch with Finn and Poe. Probably she shouldn't have ordered a second Long Island Iced Tea at lunch. When Poe had offered to take them out though, insisting the meal was on him, and the server told them it was two-for-one drinks, she’d decided to take advantage of not being the Designated Driver and threw back a second, swallowing all her frustrations over house hunting with the drink.

Apparently, it was particularly potent because she heard herself giggle as she stumbled hard enough to leave a bruise on her shin on the kitchen island.

Rubbing at her leg while walking, bent over at the waist, her laugh trailed off. She righted herself to see Ben sitting in an armchair, looking at his phone in the living room. It was 1:45 in the afternoon on a Thursday afternoon, and she was not expecting him. It nearly shocked her sober.

God, he’s fucking delicious.

Heading for him, all quiet and handsome and pensive, his eyes pierced her, drawing her like a magnet.

Forgetting the steps into the sunken room, she tripped a bit and ended up right in front of Ben’s lap breathlessly.

She grabbed the phone out of his hands without a word, tossing it onto the glass coffee table beside her. She pulled his arms away from him, climbing right into his lap uninvited and buried her face in his neck, helping him as he reached to encircle her, pulling his solid arms around herself tighter.
Better, she thought. Finally.

This was a better antidote for her angst than alcohol.

This was better than anything.

He smelled like spices and laundry detergent and his cologne, and Rey moaned a sigh into his throat as she settled her butt deeper into his lap.

“You’re drunk,” he said into her hair, amusement in his voice.

“You’re here.”

“I have a couple hours before I go into the hospital tonight for work.”

“Officially my favorite surprise ever.”

Damn it, she wished she wasn’t drunk. Rey hadn’t seen Ben since Saturday night, and she’s disappointed this is the state she found herself in when the universe had brought him to her, materializing before her eyes.

She was mad about being unable to think straight or see without her brain feeling swimmy.

This is all wrong.

She should go get some coffee, go sober up, take advantage of him being here.

Her body felt so heavy, it wouldn’t cooperate at all, and she felt like a shell curled up in Ben’s lap, rocked in the Gulf waves, smooth and pretty and lightweight, floating close to the surface with every swell of the water and back down to the sandy sea floor again.

“Well, aren’t you two cozy?” Poe teased as he entered.

Ben tensed up palpably beneath her. His pulse jumped in his neck under her lips where she sat nestled, and she snuggled her head against him further. Adjusting himself, he tightened his arms around her while she kept her eyes closed. She assumed he was either ignoring or glaring at his brother.

Shhhhhhh. Ben's home. Go away.

Poe dropped onto the couch beside the chair Rey and Ben were curled into with a heaving sigh, and Finn accompanied him a moment later. They continued their debate about the latest Marvel superhero movie and which make-believe character was the better fighter, their words obviously slurred, their voices growing more animated with every volley of their debate.

“I’m getting up,” Rey decided, tired of listening. “I’m going to make coffee.”

Moving to stand but Ben squeezed her briefly, and kissed her hair.

“You sit. I’ll make you some.”
He lifted her to the ground, standing in tandem with her, and disappeared into the kitchen before she could sit again.

*A shell. *I'm a shell and he's the waves.*

She wobbled back into the chair, warm from Ben, and pulled her knees up, watching him walk to the kitchen.

“Rey, Reyreyreyreyreyreyreyrey,” Poe said. “Tonight. We’re going dancing tonight.”

He stood from the couch and pulled at Rey’s hands, standing her up.

She’d just sat down, and now she was back up again.

*Dizzy.*

Poe twined their hands together as he moved closer, rocking to imaginary music, humming a melody, pulling her against his chest.

She wasn’t going to get out of the club invite easily this time if he was already planning it this early in the day, and Rey groaned as he twirled her beneath his arm, her head swimming.

“I leave for work again tomorrow, back to Laketown. It’s got to be tonight. Come on, you *promised*, you minx,” he reminded her.

His left hand found the small of her back and his right hand was still laced with hers. She laughed a little in spite of herself as he dipped her backward, not expecting it. She regretting it immediately, feeling the movement keenly when she stood up straight again, hit with a devastatingly strong wave of nausea.

*Stop. Make the room stop. Note to self, no more lunchtime cocktails with these two demons.*

Her eyes were squeezyed shut as she tried to make her body and the whole damn room stop swaying, so she didn’t see Ben so much as feel his towering presence come between her body and Poe’s.

Ben ripped their hands apart, her arms dropping to her sides and he pushed Poe hard in the chest with his fingertips, crowding him powerfully enough to make Poe stumble backward onto the couch beside Finn.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?”

“What am I - - what the fuck are you doing? I’m just dancing, why the fuck are you even here right now?” Poe yelled back, getting in Ben’s face.
Rey’s head protested, throbbing.

“I can be here whenever I want, they’re my parents too, Poe. What, you think this is fine for you to treat Rey like this? Get her drunk off her ass in the middle of the day and start feeling her up in the goddamn daylight?”

“No one forced me to drink! I’m an adult! she’d argue if she could.

She was so hot.
And her stomach was swirling like a waterspout.
And her head was pounding.

Can’t we go back to sitting in the chair? I just want to go back to sitting in the chair together. Or better yet, curled up in my bed together. That’s what I want. I want that.

She wanted to drag Ben away from this nonsense and make him pliable and sweet to her again. She’d rather spend the afternoon wrapped up in him on her bed where she’s laid fantasizing about him all week in her utter boredom and longing.

She didn not want to be standing here, watching him fume at his brother, both of them looking like a pair of rams about to lock horns.

But, he was tall and angry, and she couldn’t get his attention.

“Guys…”

Finn stood to move between them, but this dance was a familiar one for them, this one-on-one between brothers, and they were in no way deterred.

“She’s a goddamn adult, Ben. S he’s not some child you need to parent, Ben . She can make her own fucking decisions, and today she decided to come out and get drunk with me .”

It was the wrong thing to say.

Ben grabbed the front of Poe’s shirt in his fists as he walked them back towards the couch again, Poe’s feet left without traction as Ben threw him onto the couch.

Finn scrambled, trying to separate them to no avail, pulling on Ben’s shoulders in an attempt to stop
him, but it didn’t even slow him down, didn’t even faze him.

Rey doubted he even felt it.

“How many women you need to feel like a man, huh, Poe? One girl isn’t enough for you, you piece of shit?”

One knee on the edge of the couch, his fists in Poe’s shirt holding him still, Ben shouted down at his brother, bouncing Poe into the couch for emphasis.

“Ben…”

Wanting to help, Rey called weakly as she clutched her churning stomach, horrified at their fight.

She felt responsible.

She felt alone.

She felt like a pile of burning trash.

Planted on the spot behind them helplessly, she cursed internally over and over, fuck fuck fuck, for being drunk and useless. Tears pricked her eyes, and she sniffled.

_I didn’t know I was about to cry._

To her horror, she immediately realized she wasn’t about to cry after all, she was about to be sick.

She tore down the hall towards the closest powder room, slamming the door behind her, and narrowly avoided smacking her head on the pedestal sink as she threw the lid of the toilet up and threw up violently.

Several times.

Shaking, she flushed and stood to examine herself. Taking in her raccoon eyes, mascara thick and smudgy, her frizzy hair, sweaty armpits, and bright pink cheeks, she leaned on the sink to run cool water in her hands over every surface she could reach from crown to clavicle. She rinsed her mouth, rubbing at her teeth with the pad of her index finger, careful not to hit her gag reflex, and finally turned off the water with a deep sigh.

_Well, that happened._

It was quiet and empty when she walked into the living room.

She had no idea where the boys had gone, but she assumed they’ve dispersed different directions. Climbing the stairs to her room, hoping to brush her teeth properly, maybe clean her armpits and get a new shirt, she found Ben sitting on her bed.
Against the headboard, leaned back with eyes closed, his knees were drawn up and apart where they held up his forearms, hands dangling in front of his shins.

For some reason, she felt heartened that he’d kicked his shoes off beside her bed. He'd be trapped here with her at least for a while, and she knew she'd see the ghost of those shoes where they lay now every time she walked in this room from now on.

She stopped at the foot of the bed, unsure.

_Is he mad at me?_

_Should I approach him?_

_Can we start over?_

Ben opened his eyes, lowering his chin to look at her.

“Come here, sweetheart.”

His voice was lower and quieter than she’d ever heard it.

She crawled up to him, too ready to act out what she’d been fantasizing about all week to think of hesitating. This was a moment for seizing, and she wasn't even sure how much time she’d been given.

Turning her back to him, she used his knees to position herself against his chest, settling between his legs, resting against the warm wall of his chest.

She leaned her head back onto his shoulder as he scooped her hair away, fingertips brushing her throat.

Her head tipped, her eyes closed. She was finally feeling good again. He was healing her, fixing her.

_Dear God, yes. Do that. Touch me some more._

_Glorious._

“I’m sorry,” she heard him murmur.

Actually, maybe they all three had apologies to make, her and Ben and Poe, but it was complicated to figure out who needed to apologize to whom, and for what, and her head felt fragile as a teacup.

“Just hold me, ok? Please. Hold me like this and... God, Ben, just let me pretend you’re not leaving again in a minute.”

He bent to kiss the rim of her ear.

“Shhh, close your eyes. I’ve got you.”
His mouth grazed her skin in a way she'd find ticklish, if she didn't want his mouth on her so desperately.

She wrapped her hand behind his head, pulling him closer, her whole self complying, the last thing she could even remember.

******

Leia was just sitting down, kicking off her rubber clogs for the first time since lunch when she heard someone lumbering down the stairs they way Ben did. She was shocked a minute later to see it was actually Ben who appeared.

“Ben! What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were home!”

He rounded her to plant a kiss on her cheek, while she took the rare opportunity to pat his arm as he went by.

“I missed Rey.”

Popping a handful of almonds into his mouth, scooped from the beveled crystal candy dish on the island, he looks at her unapologetically.

“Well,” she hedged, guessing at how he wanted her to respond, “Rey is very…missable.”

He just smiled at her as he chomped.

He looked proud of himself.

She was smiling at her son, and he didn’t mind.

*Mental note.*

Han piped up from across the room where he’s been washing a dish.

“Listen, kid, don’t fuck this up. You hear what I’m telling you? You break that girl’s heart there’ll be hell to pay. For all of us.”

He pointed at Ben with dishwater dripping from his fingers.

Ben was only slightly irked, Leia could tell.

He grabbed another fistful of almonds and spoke slowly.

“Would you have broken mom’s heart?”

Which wasn’t fair because Leia was right here in the room, and Han nearly *did* break her heart and fuck everything up. Many, many, *many* times, in fact.
When she’d lost the first baby, he’d left for eight solid months, and hadn’t written once. Leia had almost wished she’d died with her baby, she was so decimated.

The second time wasn't quite so long, but she’d still picked up the pieces alone while he sailed away with Chewie towards the horizon somewhere.

“Allright, alright. All I’m saying is don’t fuck it up. And for God’s sake, don’t knock her up till you’re good and ready.”

“Dad. I plan to be selfish with her for a long time.”

“Christ, I don’t want to hear that, Ben. Jesus, forget I said anything. Ugh.”

Han groaned, and Chewie chuckled without looking up from where he sat reading the paper beside Leia at the kitchen table.

_Yeah, that smile on Ben’s face is undeniably smug Solo masculinity, through and through._

Leia beamed.

Ten minutes later, Finn and Poe walked through the front door carrying take-out bags overflowing with gourmet sandwiches from the deli at the far end of the key.

Poe walked past Ben closely enough for Ben to speak to him without alerting their parents, and making a whole, big thing about it, and he reached for his brother’s arm as he walked by.

“Look, Poe. I’m sorry, man,” Ben said quietly.

“Ben, cut it out. None of that, bro.”

Poe waved away with a hand, and a shake of his head.

“Here,” he said, handing Ben a sandwich.

He slugged his little brother on the back and took a seat.

******

Rey flounced towards the kitchen feeling refreshed and sublime, waking from a nap feeling better than she could remember feeling in days after having fallen asleep in Ben’s arms. His shoes hadn’t moved from her bedroom floor when she’d opened her eyes, panicked and looking at the floor for reassurance.

He was still here somewhere and Rey went to find him.

When she walked into the kitchen, drawn by the sounds of her people gathered there, she headed
straight for Ben and lifted her arm to hug him around his shoulders where he sat, enjoying the height difference to her advantage for once.

He swung his arm around her waist and yanked her down onto his lap, leaving his arm loose around her waist, pushing his face into her hair at her neck for a minute, his lips on her.

No one addressed it, though the amusement was conspicuous.

When Maz walked in from the laundry room, Rey was still on Ben’s lap where he held her protectively.

Rey was busy enjoying being held by him like she was something he couldn’t do without, refusing to let her leave his lap while the family laughed and chatted over dinner. Maz was the only person who dared a double-take at her daughter.

Choosing a wax-paper-wrapped sandwich from the pile in the center of the table, Maz walked past Rey to her waiting chair around the table next to Chewie, patting Rey’s knee lovingly as she passed.

Probably, there had never been a better feeling on earth than the one Rey felt bubble as she tightened her arm around Ben's shoulders while he rumbled with laughter beneath her. His hands on her hip, his body firm under her, everyone she loved around one table, Rey wondered if this was real, or if she was about to wake from a good dream.

At dusk beside his car, when Ben left at seven to drive back down to work for the 10 pm shift, he put his hands on Rey's hips and pulled her to himself. Pressing their pelvises tight, his hand trailed her lower back and he pulled her closer, his eyes locked on hers, every movement insistent.

He dragged his hand up her back to her spine between her shoulder blades, and pulled her chest against his, no space left between them.

Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her forehead, pushing her hair off her neck with his strong hands.

He kissed her nose, then her cheek, then the other cheek, then her chin.

Then he winked at her.

And he left.

When she walked back in the house, melted and needy, she went to splash cold water on her face. Ben's self-control was unreal, and she knew what was awaiting her in his arms for her would be worth it.

She could barely wait.

She ate a slice of layer cake with her mother and Leia in the kitchen, and neither of them said a word to her about Ben except how lovely dinner had been with everyone home.

They did, however, start planning which day to go for pedicures, and Rey listened to them chatter on either side of her. Chocolate cake in her mouth, and Ben’s ghost around her body, a spreading wave of warm bliss lifted her like a shell in the dark waves outside.

******

To: Ben
From: Rey
8:08 pm

Ben Solo, I swear to God, if you don’t kiss me soon, I’ll beat you to it. And we know how you feel about being beaten by a girl.

To: Rey
From: Ben
9:07 pm

Rey Kanata, when I kiss you, I need time. Plenty of time. I need to kiss you with years worth of what I have saved up for you.

To: Ben
From: Rey
9:08 pm

Oh yeah?

To: Rey
From: Ben
9:09 pm

I’m serious, baby girl. Prepare yourself. I am going to kiss your pretty mouth until you can’t fucking stand, can’t fucking breathe, can’t remember anything but my fucking name.

To: Ben
From: Rey
9:10 pm
*can’t talk*
*fanning self*
*clutching pearls*

To: Rey
From: Ben
9:11 pm
Next time I come home, you’re all mine.
Agree?

To: Ben
From: Rey
9:12 pm
Oh my God, Ben, come home and put your hands on me.

To: Rey
From: Ben
9:13 pm
Oh, Rey, don’t worry.
I have a detailed and lengthy list compiled of ways I intend to put my hands on you.

To: Ben
From: Rey
9:14 pm
Baby, I’ll never make it till you come home again. How long?
To: Rey

From: Ben

9: 15 pm

Five nights.

Five nights and I’ll come back for you, sweetheart.

******

Chapter End Notes

uselessenglishmajor is my beta and a living wonder.

Comments and kudos earn you free sins and get you to heaven faster. It's science.

xox
strawberrycupcake_huckleberrypie.tumblr.com
Chapter Summary

Welcome to Chapter 6, AKA: They Kiss. And then some.

This, dear ones, is where we earn our "E" rating.

You may proceed. xox

Chapter Notes

dedicated to my beta sister, uselessenglishmajor, who appreciates how Chapter 6 puts the "X" in Explicit.

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter 6

Impossible

June 2018

It’s while he’s laying in bed, staring at his ceiling, considering things critically that Ben realizes it’s beginning to feel a bit like he is leading a double life. While he is Dr. Solo, second year surgical resident at the hospital from sun up till sundown, he is also Rey’s Ben every other minute.
There’s no question which is his preference.

Rey is like living light to him, his guiding star, his beacon, his lighthouse now.

Or maybe she always was.

There’s no way to tell.

He belongs to her, and he fucking likes it.

He wants their lives so enmeshed, so entangled he couldn’t figure out who he was without her anymore, even if you jailed him or offered him a billion dollars or blackmailed him.

She’s It for him, she’s his endgame, she’s his starting gun and his finish line.

She makes what he does for a living have purpose, she’s what he looks forward to opening his eyes to, she’s who he’s thinking about as he heads to sleep. This makes being away from her during the days he’s working like a brow-beaten dog feel impossible, though.

He’s having trouble reconciling how to be both these versions of himself and he wonders about how to stay sane.

Or, at least how to remain at his personal baseline of sanity.

He has these internal dialogues with himself often, normally while staring up at his ceiling as if a neon sign will appear and blink all the answers down at him but, really, he doesn’t need neon signs and blinking instruction anymore.

He just needs her.

But, she’s two hours away.

Asleep.

Without him.

In a house where she will wake and he will picture her as she moves through every room, all day long while he spends his day in surgery.

Here.

Without her.

In…fuck, just three hours.

He’s not sleeping well at the condo anymore.

He will show up for work feeling surly, a walking middle finger to anyone besides his attending physician and their patients, although he thanks God he was smart enough to have chosen a specialty where his patients are asleep, cut open on a table with a tube down their throat so he doesn’t have to talk to them.
Shit, he thinks, *that was dark*.

He hates that he’s so tired from this job he’s become a grouchy, unbearable asshole. He knows he tends to be prickly under the best circumstances, but this schedule in combination with the fact it keeps him from Rey so much is making him an honest-to-god savage fucking beast.

It’s alarming even to him.

He’s got to align these two halves of himself, he’s got to work harder, push himself more.

He’s *got* to make this work.

He’s worked so hard for nearly 29 years, to fail now makes him feel a panic attack coming on.

There is no turning back, there's no other path.

He has to make this work, just survive it.

He will persevere as Dr. Solo, surgical resident, even if he has to be an asshole a lot of the time, and he’ll get refueled basking in time with his girl as much as humanly possible.

Ben has so much angst over this proposition, especially when he lets himself count the 5 years he’ll be making this situation work he thinks maybe he has the energy to channel his frustrations into a strength that will pull all of Long Beach Key down two hours south, outside his window.

Working had been easier when he hadn’t let himself be crazy, insanely in love with Rey.

Easier maybe, but darker.

******

“Ah, young Dr. Solo,” Dr. Snoke addresses him, handing Ben an opened beer.

He’s wearing beige scrubs and without his surgical cap, he’s bald as a newborn bird.

He has those distinctive creases in his face, the effects of a long, hard life of smoking, drinking, working split shifts, the permanently unpleasant demeanor of a surgeon who’s been tired and crabby about it the majority of his life, and Ben can only wonder with horror if this is what awaits him in 40 years.

Standing here, in Snoke’s house, where Ben had been strongly requested to meet him, surrounded by his personal belongings, Ben feels the familiar oppression of Snoke’s influence. Everything here has been chosen and highlighted at Snoke’s specifications and Ben has the distinct awareness standing here, he’s another polished, chosen part of the surgeon’s collection.

The art, though sparse is severe, the wall-sized, 30-foot wide abstract painting in monochromatic blood red, specifically framed as centerpiece faces the floor-to-ceiling wall of windows leading to the water, an obnoxiously on-the-nose selection of art for a surgeon, as far as Ben is concerned. It’s not ironic, it’s more like nauseating to Ben.
He thinks about his mother’s choices of impressionist artwork, her preference for floral china patterns, thinks about how being a plastic surgeon does not necessitate a clinical-looking personal life and he makes himself a mental note to pay more attention to his condo.

The imposing but bleak home seems built to intentionally intimidate, the sharp angles harsh and the grim lighting chosen deliberately to cast an inky dark glow over the grounds. It feels somehow wintry, even if this is Florida, and it’s 85 and muggy in the dark.

All the fixtures and options of the house made of unforgiving steel and metal, not a fabric or wood grain in slight.

Every inch of this house is decorated in severe shades of black, red and grey and Ben gazes down at himself, remembering he’s outfitted in black scrubs head to toe, the official color of resident surgeons per Snoke’s policy, and he realizes with the bitter realization he is a belonging.

Ben takes a swig of the beer, it’s actually amazing, and he peeks at the label.

It’s as impressive as this house, stunning but totally lacking warmth like that of his parents’ familial style, this contemporary monstrosity custom built by some European-based architect, overlooking the Intercostal waterway.

Ben catches a glimpse of the 70-foot dock past the infinity pool and the enormous yacht, The Supremacy, which Ben knows to come complete with hired captain and quarters for 10.

He looks around and takes it all in and drinks his beer.

He’s trying not to be sour, his evening having been hijacked by his boss as they left the O.R. who instructed him to arrive by 8 pm tonight, leaving no possibility for Ben to fly home for the night and sleep beside Rey.

“This is an amazing home, Dr. Snoke,” Ben politely tells him, pretty sure that’s what he’s hoping to hear.

He’s honed this ability to brown-nose his attendings during medical school where Snoke would come guest-lecture in New York quarterly and he’s still got the hang of it.

“It is. It is indeed,” Snoke replies, always haughty.

“You need to see for yourself what medicine can afford, Solo. You have to learn how to harness it, how to create wealth and fortune for yourself, my boy, or you’ll never get ahead.”

Ben’s stomach feels like it’s fermenting with only this beer in it since breakfast at 6 am.

He wants his girl. He wants a pizza. He wants a bed and to turn his brain off.

In that order.

“Yes, sir,” Ben says because he really can’t think of how else to tell Snoke that sounds like a fucking
unattractive way to live.

“You know, Solo, I’ve had my eye on you since your days at medical school. You are special, my boy. I had known your family lineage of course, the legacy, and have been fascinated by your career. I see so much of myself in you. You are simply full of potential,” Snoke continues.

The words he’s saying are complimentary but, they feel nauseating to Ben. The lineage he’s referencing includes not just his mother’s plastic surgery practice two hours north and her brother’s Emergency medicine practice in Oregon, but his grandfather’s Skywalker’s meteoric rise and historic fall from honor in the medical community.

The Skywalker name is forever correlated with dishonesty, his grandfather having lost his license in a spectacular scandal once his massive surgical practice was exposed as having pressured dozens of unnecessary elective surgeries, ultimately leading to crimes of insurance fraud, coercion and money laundering.

And this is the “legacy” Snoke is mentioning to him now as if it’s praise.

Ben glances at the front door. *How much more of this bullshit must I endure?* he thinks.

“You can’t know my disappointment in you then, Ben, as I have watched you slowly throw all that natural ability, all those impressive credentials away.”

Ben’s ears perk up. *And now we enter the criticism stage,* he thinks.

He listens and says nothing.

“Every time I turn around, I find you lacking. Your skills are notably superb but, workmanship shoddy. Your work ethic spotty. And, I find more troubling than all the other concerns your propensity to shirk responsibility and disappear apparently out of town at the drop of a hat to be not only highly unusual but, deeply troubling. I have, in fact, been told there is something as inconsequential as a girl driving you to distraction - a girl,” he spits, clearly disgusted.

“At first,” he continues, “when I was told this I refuted it. My faithful apprentice? Dr. Solo? Not possible. Now, I doubt myself and find perhaps I was too eager to afford you my support. If your head can so easily be turned by a girl, if you can so freely hand over the control of not only your career but, also the potential for your future success and power, I wonder at your being a part of my team at all. I assure you, there is an endless succession of stellar candidates who would jump at the chance to take your place, should you fall behind and prove yourself unworthy of the task.”

Ben is shaken. The thinly-veiled threats are hitting him where it hurts, making him feel familiar panic rising.

That he’s failing.

That he’s been found not good enough.

Again.

He wants to throw this beer bottle at that godforsaken piece of shit artwork and watch it smash. He wants to put his fist through those spotless glass walls. He wants to rail against these accusations
because he knows he’s a dime-a-dozen as a resident but, he’s also not bad at his job, he’s actually really good at it.

And who the fuck does Snoke think he is, acting like he’s God’s gift to the world of surgery, worshiping Anakin Skywalker like an icon of medicine, trying to tell Ben what to do and where to go in his free time?

*She’s not just any girl, he thinks, she’s MY girl.*

*You don’t own me,* Ben wants to tell him.

He says nothing though, and Ben’s head droops in shame as he realizes if Snoke really didn’t own him, Ben would’ve told him so.

“I only want to see you realize all the potential I see in you, Solo. That is why I share this with you now. I want to see you rise up and take what is rightfully yours. Take up the mantle as next in line to a surgical legacy and *succeed.* I want you to grasp what true power is in medicine - in policy change, in lobbying, in forcing reform. It is all available to you. Do not allow yourself to be seduced by laziness or intrigue.”

*This,* Ben thinks, *could all blow up in my face if I am not careful.*

He could lose his job.

His title.

His pride.

He could lose a way to prove himself further.

He could lose himself.

He could lose Rey.

Ben only nods and shakes his hand on his way out a few minutes later.

“Thank you, Dr. Snoke.”

“You’re welcome, Solo. Goodnight,” he purrs, closing the door behind Ben on his way out.

*****

It’s late and dark and silent aside from the waves when Ben puts his key in the lock of the Dutch
door to the kitchen and he punches in the code to disarm the shrill security alarm as fast as possible.

The last thing he wants right now is to wake up anyone in this house with the exception of his girl, knowing anyone else will keep him away from her considerably longer than he’s willing to tolerate.

This has been a shit week and he is so done with it.

If it wasn’t enough to have worked 80 plus hours, operated on complex patients and gone without any sleep on his last overnight at the hospital, he’d also had that fucking “meeting” with Snoke.

He’s over it.

This week has kicked his ass, beaten him to a pulp every single way it could’ve and he’s bloody and bruised and staggering from it and there’s one treatment that will work for him and he knows her name.

Mercifully, no one emerges to greet him and he’s never been more thankful.

He kicks off his shoes, drops his messenger bag, stethoscope, white coat and keys on the kitchen table. He pulls off his scrub shirt and socks, throws them hastily to the laundry room floor, stripping himself of anything and everything that weighs him down and steals him from Rey on a daily basis, leaving his Dr. Solo persona in the kitchen with all that shit.

He climbs the stairs two at a time and doesn’t stop moving till he opens the door to Rey’s room and sees her asleep under the complicated quilts in that bed too big for just her, feels his heart twist inside his chest.

He runs the back of his hand over her impossibly soft cheek, feels her stir.

“Rey,” he whispers a prayer, a petition, a plea.

She opens her eyes a little, and smiles a tender smile at him, arches her back, lifts her chest towards him.

“Ben?” she’s half-asleep, maybe mostly-asleep.

“Sweetheart,” his voice nearly breaks.

He moves to gather her out from under these blankets as she reaches for him and sees she’s wearing panties and a tank top but no bra and he identifies dueling desires both to shield her from sight and gulp her down whole.

He lifts his girl without a word and holds her close.

His feet still for a minute as he resets his brain.

His arms flex, happy to be used correctly, his back straightens, proud to know she belongs with him.

He feels like himself again.
“You’re home,” she croons sleepily.

“Come sleep in my room?” he asks.

“Mmmplease,” she murmurs.

“I’ve got you,” he swears it.

Ben carries her, her knees lazy and her feet dangling, her arms loose around him.

He holds her close, his hollow spaces filling, his lungs expanding to maximum for the first time in days.

He nudges his own bedroom door open with his toe, places Rey in his bed, strips to his boxers, watches her stretch briefly and blink at him before he climbs in beside her, pulling the blankets to his waist.

He lays down and feels Rey curve into him, and he scoops as much of her beautiful body as close as he can.

Every part of him is buzzing with the completion of what feels like a fucking marathon of a week, culminating in this bed. He pulls his fingers through her soft hair.

_A girl so soft, it’s like she can’t be real_, he thinks.

_A mermaid_, he thinks.

He cradles her skull in his hand and tilts her head back in his palm and kisses her sweet goddamn lips like he’s been waiting his whole fucking life to start living and it’s the truth, he actually hasn’t ever lived a single minute till he kissed her and he has absolutely no idea how he’s lived 29 years without this.

He’d stayed away, he’d stayed so fucking far away from her to survive without what he must have always known she had, maybe he’d always known it was what he needed - it’s here in her mouth, on her lips, in her arms.

Her body in his arms his lifeline erasing the entire last week, the last six years of hiding from her.

She’s found him.

Finally, he’s found her.

He kisses her, he slips his tongue into her mouth to drink her deeper, to seal them together closer, and her hands on him are pardon for every girl he ever kissed before her.

He may never stop kissing her.
He may just live in this bed forever now, feeling his girl in his arms, feeling her kiss him.

She’s breathing answers and oxygen and light and healing and what he needs in his life, right into him.

She brings him back to life.

He opens his eyes and sees her staring back at him with a tenderness that resuscitates his heart, her hands lost in his hair, wonder passing between them like electricity.

She nudges his nose with her own, smiles at him like he’s hers and kisses him again and again and again.

He kisses his name from her mouth and swallows her moans and laces their hands together and gazes into her eyes, alive.

“Rey,” he’s propped above her, eye-to-eye, fingers laced beside her head on the pillow, his voice certain and needy.

“I am done fucking around. I want this settled. I want this locked the fuck down. I have waited so long for you and I can’t take it anymore. No more wondering. No more sleeping in that fucking guest room. I want you where I can reach you in this fucking bed beside me. Where you belong. I want you with me. I need you with me, Rey. I need you.”

“Ben - God, what took you so long,” she asks, lifting her mouth to meet his, her kiss devouring.

His hands run the length of her body, up and down, terrain unexplored and uncharted that blossoms in his hand, her eyes closed while his fingers venture inside her and complete her, her hushed groans of bliss enough to nearly kill him with pleasure of his own.

She gives him what he needs - his very life, his source of energy, and it’s a privilege that surges his chest with masculine pride to escalate her like this - just his touch and his kiss making her wild, her hands clawing at him, her kiss desperate, helpless in his hands, drowning in what he gives her, what he does to her.

“Rey, you are heaven,” he murmurs, and he means every word of it, “I think your body was fucking made for me.”

His week, his job, his turbulence fall away as she crescendos and falls apart in his hands, melted and magnificent, wrapped around him, giving him all his strength back and then some.

His beautiful girl a mess of his making.
That look in her eyes for him when she’s floated back down again made pliant and satisfied by his hands, heated and devoted, it’s a fucking marvel - addicting, irresistible, exquisite.

He’s never felt so confident, so enraptured.

It’s almost inevitable when his palm moves to ease his own trembling need, moving involuntarily, lost in the moment of watching her come apart under him in his hands.

He’s above her, those sweet, soft eyes gazing up at him like he’s a god, her hands laced behind his neck and she says “baby, come on me, show me I belong to you. Right here. Please,” his heat trapped and aching between their bellies.

He’s helpless beyond uttering “fuck, fuck, baby girl…” adrift and annihilated by this woman immediately, powerless to do anything but comply, cover her, mark her, claim her skin, her heart, her body.

He’s trembling a violent release of emotion into her kiss when she breathes him in, bringing him back to earth, bringing his mind back into his skin, bringing his heart rate back to normal, so many years of hiding and waiting and wishing finally undone, unwound on her skin underneath him.

Her gaze is victorious, she’s claimed him as he’s claimed her and her eyes twinkle with glory.

It’s late and dark and silent when Ben stares into his girl’s eyes, his fingertips still learning the curves of her underneath her clothes, her eyes still casting a spell over his, their bodies still entwined.

He has what he needs.

Finally.

It’s her. He needs her.

When he finally does sleep it is without ever having looked at the ceiling.

******

He’s slept past 6, he immediately realizes when his eyes open and the room is flooded with light. It’s blurry behind his eyes but, he blinks hard to appreciate the apparition approaching him.

Rey is wearing cotton shorts - short cotton shorts - and has a hoodie half zipped over a tank top, sleeves pushed up past her elbows with her hair a straight-up mess of a braid behind her shoulder.

She’s smiling at him as she closes the bedroom door with a click and she has two mugs of coffee in her hands.
Holy hell, this is what I have been missing down in that shit hole of my normal life, he thinks.

He props himself up against the headboard using pillows thinking she’s the most divine creature God ever fashioned. And she comes bearing coffee for him.

She’s a damn vision.

Handing him one of the mugs and pulling her knees underneath her as she sits beside him, she takes a sip and he does the same, watching her lips.

I may be the luckiest bastard alive. I kissed this woman. God, she let me put my hands all over her. Holy fuck, she asked me to come on her. What is this life I am living?! Fuck, I can’t believe this is that girl in that little fucking pink dress.

“So, hi,” she says. She sounds nervous.

“God, why do you have to be so beautiful? It’s not safe. You have no idea how fast I drove last night to get here,” he says, trying to push past his nerves himself. If he can get her comfortable and past embarrassment he can kiss her and put his hands on her some more.

“Was last night real? I’m pretty sure it wasn’t real. Did I dream that?” her tone has become overtly playful now, teasing. This is a game.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you dreamed it,” he tells her.

“You must have walked in your sleep. How did you even get in here with me?” he teases her back.

“Oh, I dunno. You dream anything for six solid years, you’re bound to act it out at some point, I guess,” she takes a sip of her coffee, looking into his eyes over the edge of her mug.

She’s telling him something significant with this. She’s sending him a message she’s thought about making out in his bed with him before, that she’s wanted it, everything they did.

The information goes straight to his groin.

“Sweetheart, if that’s the case, you’d better buckle up. There’s a whole shit ton of acting out heading your way,” he tells her, with a dirty smirk.

“You don’t scare me, Ben Solo,” she tells him, “that’s more a promise than a threat as far as I’m concerned.”

Before he can grab her, she jumps up from the bed with a laugh.

“Get some shorts on, let’s go run before it gets too hot,” she leans in and kisses him.

He would prefer to stay in this room all day, crawl all over her, kiss the fire out of her and drive her crazy, bring her to climax and learn her and memorize her and earn a graduate level degree in pleasing her but, he realizes there are people in the house undoubtedly since it’s a normal Wednesday morning and he can’t afford Rey feeling any embarrassment.
Deciding to acquiesce he nods and gets more serious about drinking his coffee.

He glances at his phone and sees a text from Dr. Snoke unread, the preview visible on his home screen.

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To: Ben
From: Snoke, M.D.
5:24 am
Solo, next weekend I will be in D.C. for policy reform committee.
You’ll be coming with me.
-Snoke

He pushes the sleep button on his phone. No way is he thinking about work right now. He runs his hand through his hair, brushes his thoughts of the hospital and Snoke and work away with it and smiles at Rey.

“Come on, slowpoke,” he says as he finishes his cup, reaching to steal Rey’s and downing hers before she can stop him.

“Hey!” she objects.

Winking at her from above a mouthful of coffee, he moves to the bathroom with a handful of clothes and shuts the door.

Before he lets her head downstairs, he surprises and catches her around the waist outside her room where she has changed into a sports bra, shorts and a smoother version of her braid, and he kisses her good and deep and breathless before releasing her, threading his hand into hers as they descend the staircase.

*****

Luckily, Ben has long legs and it’s a good thing because Rey is a runner. Apparently, being a Navy vet turned her into some kind of super mermaid runner phenom because he’s either out of shape or she’s got him beat.

He’s panting and he’s a sweaty mess but, she’s still talking without much effort. They’ve gotten about a quarter of the way down the key when they turn around at a stop sign and head back. He thinks about the fact he only has a couple more weeks to marinate in her like this, to come home whenever the drive to see her becomes unbearable and monopolize her at his leisure.

She’ll start at the marina in about a week and a half or so and then he’ll have to sit around and find something to do on days like today, waiting on her to come home so he can pounce on her.

He decides not to waste time.
When they’re two houses from the estate, Ben sneaks a mischievous smile at Rey, jerking his head for her to follow him and he ducks down a private drive on someone else’s property. He jumps a hedge and picks up speed as he tears through a neighbor’s backyard and hears Rey hiss “Ben!” behind him, admonishing him.

He’s beating her.

He’s planning already to be arrogant about this later.

He leads the way, twisting and weaving through the yard and into the one beside it, ducking to keep out of sight where he knows the owners will be able to see them. He remembers easily how to navigate these directions from his high school days when the gate guard at the estate was an old man named Lor who Ben knew to be a judgey, old tattle whom he avoided when he snuck home past curfew.

Rey is hot on his tail, both of them pushing in an all-out sprint, racing as they near their own orange groves in the distance, nestled between the pink and yellow cottages flanking them.

Ben reaches the nearest line of trees first, barely edging Rey and even though his chest is heaving he slows to a walk, picks her up, tosses her over his shoulder and jogs towards the pool.

She’s too out of breath to fight him, she just lectures him while she hangs face-down over his back and he grips the back of her thighs, lets himself rub them gently while he catches his breath.

“You’re…such…a…sore loser…can’t…ever…stand to…get…beaten…by a girl,” she struggles.

“I just like…to see…you sweaty…and mad,” he tells her.

Arriving at the pool, they kick off their shoes and socks, drenched with sweat and Ben peels his t-shirt from his torso.

Everything else remains intact, knowing Maz is somewhere around, likely in the kitchen with a view of the pool right now, and Han is around here somewhere though Ben bets he’d make for the hills like a spooked cat if he saw them getting into the pool together right now.

They both jump in eagerly, all the way over their heads, letting the water wash over their clammy bodies, feeling it spread out over their scalps, hair burning from facing the sun at the tops of their heads.

The baptism of the water cooling them is immediate, their clothes floating around them like choir robes in the water, billowing out from them, and the weightlessness is an aphrodisiac even if they’re trying to remember it’s broad daylight and they’re not alone.

Ben doesn’t actually have a single fuck to give.

He reaches for Rey while he wipes dripping water and sweat off his face with one broad palm, then pushes his hair off his forehead with a second swipe. Rey wraps her arms and legs around him and he’s holding her floating self while she peppers his face with kisses, finally settling her lips over his earlobe and biting it.

*She has the sweetest peach of an ass,* he thinks.

He steadies her in his arms and lifts her as he climbs out of the pool just like that, her arms and legs
wrapped around him, her eyes closed and head resting on his shoulder. He walks to the far end of the house, the one furthest from the carport workshop where his father is likely to be and furthest from the kitchen where Maz is likely to be and leans his girl up against the stucco wall gently, knowing that might hurt and kisses the hell out of her for as long as she’ll let him.

He thinks she tastes like peaches, too.

*******

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 7 coming Thursday <3

Comments and kudos earn points.
I may post a bunch, as I'm 9 chapters into my next fic, which I may love more than this one, and want to share! Squee!

xo
- Cupcake

strawberrycupcake_huckeberrypie.tumblr.com
Chapter 7
Inextricable
July 2018

Rey wakes up disoriented, accustomed to waking in The Turquoise Room and it takes her a minute to remember she’s in Ben’s bed.

It’s not as yummy as waking up with his leg thrown jealously over hers, his arm around her waist, keeping her warmer than necessary, hearing him complain when she moves to get out of bed but, it smells like him and she’ll take it. She’s stayed here since the night he carried her in and hadn’t been able to force herself back to the Turquoise Room, even if he’s gone back to Ft. Wells.

She buries her face in his pillow beside her and smiles broadly. She lets her eyes wander the room and study all the things hand-chosen by Ben over the years that make up this space. Trophies, photos, books, awards, memories, hopes, dreams, they’re all part of what built him and she gazes lovingly at each item, sending them her thanks for making such a man.

She’s overcome with awareness of her privilege to be here - to be his, to be in his bed.

She keeps thinking about being a little girl in this house, watching him in awe, amazed at how foreign he seemed to her, how she kept her distance. She thinks about being a teenager obsessing over him, away at school, of walking past this room wistfully, imagining being old enough and pretty enough to ever turn his head.

It’s surreal when she thinks about it that way, to think this is Ben’s bed she’s surrounded by, her Ben, and she shakes her head slowly, letting her brain process it all.

*How has she managed this? How did it all happen?*

Did she will it all into existence? Did she win a cosmic lottery? Did she manipulate it all into happening?

*Is it all real? Will it last?*

*God, I’m being dramatic this morning.* She rolls her eyes a little at herself.

She sits up and brushes her hair out of her eyes, tucks the blankets around her - Ben’s blankets - and reaches for her phone to text him, her first priority every morning.

To: Ben
From: Rey
7:29 am
If I kiss my phone hard enough, can you feel it on your beautiful mouth?

To: Rey
From: Ben
7:31 am
Fuck.
I wish.

Something about filthy words in his mouth drives her absolutely insane. Every time, her stomach plummets and she wants to tear his clothes off.

She doesn’t know the psychology behind it but she understands now why women fan themselves in the movies when they’re attracted to a good-looking man. She needs a fucking wind tunnel.

Gah. I am toast. she thinks. I have got it so bad for this boy.

She pulls her hair into a top knot.

But, he’s so prettyyyyyyy, she whines internally, arguing with herself.

She hears Finn knock, she recognizes it and she calls for him to come in. She’s still sitting up in bed, smiling at her phone and he plants himself in the leather club chair in the corner, throwing his arm over the back.

“Enjoying your boyfriend’s bedroom?”

He’s crazy if he thinks that’s anything but a compliment to her at this point.

“Truly,” she smirks at him.

“You’re happy,” he says. “I can read it all over you like you’re a Christmas tree. You light up when he walks in the room like you only see him. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“No one else has ever been Ben before,” she says like it’s the most logical thing in the world.

“Yeah but, Peanut, are you sure about this? Like, your families are so tangled up with your mom working here and everything…what if you two break up? Won’t that be awkward?”
Maybe she’s thought about it a little, each time shooing it away like a pesky housefly to the corner of her mind but, now that he’s giving voice to her fears she feels herself pull out a box labeled “Insecurities” and she knows she’s going to have to examine each of them painstakingly.

*People do break up with her. They do leave her, don’t they?*

Her first parents had. They were addicts who couldn’t get clean, couldn’t stay sober, couldn’t stay together, whatever - they’d left her and she’d grown up loved by Maz but knowing beneath that truth, she was leavable.

*Relinquishable.*

She’d been stingy with herself all her life, affording herself only a small circle of love, unwilling to enlarge it and danger the agony of being forsaken, deserted. The boys she’d crushed on or dated or even slept with had entered her brain but she’d held them all easily, successfully at arm’s reach from her heart.

But, this is Ben. *Ben.*

What would happen then, if he discarded her, too?

What would happen to her comfort level in this house if Ben broke it off with her? After all, it’s only been a couple weeks.

Well, 22 years she’s known him and a couple weeks but, you know. What would it be like to have to come here to see her mom if she wasn’t with Ben anymore? What would it be like around Han and Leia?

The simple answer is, it would all be incredibly shitty.

The truth underneath it is Rey is falling in love hard, fast, inextricably. Maybe permanently.

It's painful to imagine a scenario where she could move past him, move past this and it's not Finn's fault he is having a hard time wrapping his head around this thing he's witnessing between them. He's only known Rey to be contentedly single, moving through life profoundly unattached even if regularly wooed by guys she's dated.

For Finn, this is a new development. For Rey, it's the natural, right culmination of years of dreaming.

It's loving and true that Finn would be hesitant for her sake and with any other boy maybe, she would heed his words. Protect herself. Evaluate. Retreat.
But, it's Ben. 

Ben.

There is no resisting him. 
The Gulf tide could resist the moon before she could keep herself from him.

“There would be no easy way out of this, Finn. I’m officially in too deep,” she says, feigning whimsy. 
She feels like she’s on shaky ground all of a sudden.

“Well, I just want you to know I’m here for you, come what may, just like always and I’ve got your back,” he takes a breath and continues, “I like Ben. I do. I like him, and I like his family, and hell, I love this house. I’m just looking out for you Peanut, you know?”

She smiles at him, appreciating his kind heart for the millionth time. 

“If you get out now and let me get dressed, I’ll come downstairs with you and make you breakfast.”

He sprints out the door, rubbing his hands together sinisterly.

To: Ben  
From: Rey  
7:51 am  
Ben, I am needy.  
Needy, needy, demanding, and needy.  
If you were here I would be mauling you.

To: Rey  
From: Ben  
8:45 am  
Good.  
Good, good, good.  
I want to give you fucking everything.

*****
Rey is saved from the task of making breakfast by finding Han, Maz and Finn gathered around a pink cardboard box of fresh donuts when she comes downstairs.

She can smell the sugary scent all around her as she pours herself a cup of coffee before curling up in a chair. She blows her mother a kiss good morning without her hands from across the table, having wrapped them both around her mug pulled up to the top of her knees against her chest.

“I’m thinking about going over to Laketown to hang with Poe this weekend. He’s been telling me all about it, seems like a fun town. What do you think about letting me borrow your car, Peanut? That be ok?” Finn asks her, powdered sugar on his chin.

“Yeah, sure,” she reaches over to brush it off with the cuff of her sleeve.

“You can use the Suburban if you need,” Han remarks.

“Thanks, you know I’m a boring homebody,” Rey reaches for a coconut donut and grins at him. Truthfully, she’s hoping Ben will be home for the weekend.

“You can drive the El Camino, Mija,” Maz says.

The room goes quiet.
“Mama, you don’t have that old green El Camino anymore, you drive that kicky little silver Camry Han got you last year, remember?” Rey prompts her.

She watches as her mother picks up her empty coffee cup and brings it to her lips. She stares at it, then sets it back down.

“I must have forgotten to pour my coffee…” Maz says, self-consciously. Finn stands up and reaches for the empty mug from her hand as Maz’s eyes fill with tears.

“I’ll get you some more coffee, Mama. Damn thing’s empty is all,” he’s taken to calling her that, too.

Rey pats her mother’s hand and tells her, “It’s okay, Mama. It’s ok, you’re ok.”

“Hey, little girl, let’s go check out the Jeep I picked up the other day when you’re done in here. Need an opinion on something,” Han says, clearing his throat.

“Hmmm,” she nods, finishing a lemon-filled donut, “yes, sure. Let’s go, I’m ready.”

Rey stands and leans over to kiss her mother, pats Finn on the shoulder as he takes her vacated seat as he hands Maz her coffee.
She’s wearing striped drawstring pajama pants and Ben’s college sweatshirt with his last name on the back, beneath the hood. She needed it to comfort her soul a little after Finn’s chat with her this morning about her theoretical breakup with Ben.

She’s hoping it’ll work like a talisman, warding off bad juju.

She steps into a pair of tall rubber muck boots at the back door, pushes the sleeves of the sweatshirt up, and brings her coffee with her.

Once they’ve crunched gravel all the way to the carport workshop, Han picks up a couple tools and heads to the Jeep. It’s a 1995 Jeep Wrangler with only 100,000 miles on it and he’s proud of it but, that’s not what he wants to talk about.

“Listen, kiddo, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about your mother,” he starts.

“Okay,” Rey says warily. She has no idea where this is heading but, she trusts Han.

“You know with your mother’s diagnosis it’s not really safe for her to drive anymore. She could get lost or confused and forget how to get home, or she could kill somebody on accident, and I know - I know, that’s not gonna happen, I’m just saying Leia and I would like to have a conversation with her about giving up her keys. Now that you’re home.”

Rey waits because it seems like he has more to say.

She watches as he circles the Jeep, not really doing anything to it just kicking the tires and messing with the door handles and windshield wiper blades.

“Oh, thing is,” he continues, “we take her keys, she’ll need someone to drive her around sometimes. Leia and me and Chewie do that some now anyway as much as we can, it just might make her happier if it was her own kid doing the driving.”

Rey sits on a crate of newspapers and sips her coffee as she takes in all Han is laying out. He’s been saving this all up.

“So, maybe, if you haven’t found an apartment yet, maybe you might want to take the yellow cottage after all, maybe move in there. I know maybe you feel trapped, and trust me, I know it needs a little work over at that place. I think some rats got in the attic, they’re always jumping up on that roof from the goddamn orange trees but, if you’re interested I can get it fixed up for you. Finn can move in if you want, or he can stay where he is in the big house. Either way, I don’t care, doesn’t make any difference to me. Kid’s at work half the nights out of the week, anyhow.”

She raises her eyebrows asking whether that’s all.

It’s not, quite.
“And let me just say this. I know this is a lot of change, and you’re used to Navy life and college and independence, living far away from all us old people and maybe this is all a bit much. And if that’s true, well shit, I’m sorry to tell you all this and pile it on you and don’t worry, you don’t have to do any of it. But, I see the way my son looks at you like you’re good enough to eat and how you look at him like he’s a fucking knight in shining armor so, maybe you don’t mind being home again after all. So, that’s it. Alright?”

Knowing he’s finished and how much it cost him to use that many words, Rey smiles and stands to answer, her coffee gone, her belly happy with donuts and caffeine.

“How can I think about it?”
“Course.”
“Thank you.”
“Don’t mention it.”
“I’m serious,” she insists, “for all of it, all the thought and heart involved in it, thank you.”
“Yeah, well. My son hasn’t hung around the house this much since he started driving. We’re even.”

It’s a great Jeep and a fun project and by the time Rey heads back to the house, it’s flat-out too hot for the sweatshirt so she tugs it off leaving her tank underneath and carries it upstairs and buries her face in it to breathe Ben in before she goes to shower for the day.

*****

Four endless days later, the sky is bright when he opens his bedroom door and locks it behind him, his eyes on Rey in his bed immediately, moving towards her, pulling the t-shirt over his head he’s worn under his scrubs all night long while he worked a call shift at the hospital.

It must be around 7 in the morning.

The plantation shutters are closed in the room but the light is spilling through and Rey has been lying awake for 10 minutes by the time he leans over to kiss her mouth, wearing only his scrub pants, his chest and feet naked.

It’s a kiss he’s been stoking and saving up, apparently, not a mere greeting, scorching and urgent.

Rey smiles at him and stretches, luxuriating in the moment and he pulls her tank top over her head, pulls her panties off, pulls her by the hips further down the bed, looks at her eyes after each step for clues and permission. She runs her fingers through his hair as lovingly as she can, sending affirmations to him silently.
They still haven’t spoken a word.

He makes his way down her body worshipfully, with hands and mouth and she grants him access to anything he wants - she’s helpless, she’s pliable, she’s liberated. Her nerves light up, flares trailing his fingertips, his tongue, his groans, unlocking chests of pleasure, closets of goodness, delicious happiness filling her up with heat in his hands’ wake.

“Ben, Baby, are you sure?” she asks when his head is between her thighs, his eyes lowered, lost to her sight.

Without lifting his head she hears the rumble of greed in his voice, “give your man what I want.” He reaches for both her hands without looking up, twists them into his own hair and puts his sinner’s mouth to her throbbing self and she moans a filthy “yes,” tilting herself to the sky.

When she moans his name as she comes, over and over, just after she thinks fuck it, blithely deciding in a lust-addled haze to just be loud, who cares, all she can think of is high tide, sweeping her closer, closer, closer, up the sand unrelenting, brutally powerful, carelessly tossing shells up to the water’s surface, swirling them together forcefully and dropping them again to the ocean floor, repeating as the water peaks at the edge, until they’re left glittering in the sunshine on the beach, spent and drying and heaving in the sun while the water recedes.

He loses his pants while she catches her breath and he hands her panties and tank top back to her, snuggling up beside her while she dresses, seated in his bed.

“Morning,” he smirks at her, cocky and beautiful and fucking magical with those sinful eyes looking at her like that like he fucking knows what he does to her.

She crawls into him, satisfied and adoring.

“Ben Solo, I’m in love with you,” she breathes out.

She isn’t looking in his eyes, that would be too intense, she’s staring at the wall of his bedroom past him while her cheek rests on his naked chest, her breathing quieting.

The bedroom she passed a million times in her life, the bedroom with the doorway she would stand under, hungrily scanning everything her eyes fell on, once he’d moved out and she was left behind and she’d had nothing left of him to imagine but a far away school full of things she knew nothing about, and people she hated who got to see him, flirt with him, know him.
She’s been too in love with him for too long to keep it to herself.

She’s been in love with him for so many years, maybe before she even knew it, every part of her belongs to him anyway.
She wants to share everything she is with him.
She has nothing to lose.
It’s all over and done with anyway.
Not saying it wouldn’t make it any less true.

It feels like releasing a balloon into the sky, it’s so freeing to surrender it.

With her ear to his chest, she concentrates on his steady breathing.

* A rhythm, she thinks, *he's the ocean and I'm pulled by his tide.*

Slowly, gently he rolls her onto her back, both his elbows framing her head, his fingertips brushing her hair off her forehead, his knee between her thighs.

“Say it again.”

“Ben, I love you.”

His eyes search hers intently. She allows it.

“I don’t deserve you,” he confesses earnestly.

“Baby, I don’t know what to tell you,” she shrugs a little, trapped. “I’m hopeless.”

“This feels too good to be true. Like if I let myself believe it, it’ll turn out to be a joke. You’re like… Rey, you are like my heart, and my soul. And my blood. And my bones and God, Rey, I fucking love you so much, I…I…tell me you won’t disappear again. Tell me you won’t leave before I get here, you won’t be gone when I come home. Tell me you belong to me.”

She pushes his hair back, combs through it with her nails, takes her time and holds it in a ponytail at the nape of his neck with both her hands, calm.

“Ben, I have been crazy in love with you since I was 15 years old. Do you know I used to stand over there and look into this room and stare at it and miss you? I was the one who never left. I may have been the one in California but, I never left. You’re in here,” she lays a hand over her own heart.

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

He rolls his forehead against hers.

“We’re way out here at the end of this key like it’s the end of the earth, and I have you tucked away where only I can find you,” he’s smiling wickedly at her. “It’s fucking hot.”
She snickers at that. He’s making this tender moment dirty and it’s what she loves about them together, the fact they can move from tender to sexy to desperate to playful to thoughtful in sync, rolling along like waves back and forth, folding into one another and back out again.

*Well, this conversation is over,* she thinks, as she rolls him onto his back, moving lower, freeing him, taking him into her mouth, hard and needy and beautiful.

After he’s groaned around her name and come on her tongue and she’s swallowed him down her throat, bitter and perfect and salty, she can’t help but giggle like a girl, proud.

*Like saltwater,* she thinks, *like a mouth full of the ocean.*

That’s why he’s what she craves.

******

She works downstairs with her mother at the estate while Ben sleeps the day away in the bright bedroom she’s left him in, asleep before she closes the door behind her, exhausted after a night on his feet and a morning in his bed with her where he damn well belongs.

She cleans the kitchen up after breakfast and throws Han a banana as he heads to the carport workshop.

She feels her stomach twist in excitement over her job at the marina, checks her email, goes for a run, takes a shower.

She smiles to herself as she soaks the intense summer heat into her shoulders as she enters and exits the house, the humidity hitting her like a wall every time.

She goes to have tacos for lunch with Finn, she works on the Jeep with Han, she folds a load of laundry while she texts a conversation wholly made of gifs and memes with Rose, she watches *Days of Our Lives* with her mother in the formal living room on the giant TV, she pours Leia a glass of cabernet when she comes home, making one for herself, too, and Leia groans dramatically.

“Ugh. Thank you, sweet girl. That’s the good stuff, right there.”

When Ben comes down, hair mussed, barefoot and sleepy-eyed, just before dinner, he heads for her first, grabs her around her waist, kisses her ear from behind her, nuzzles her hair and squeezes her ass
in greeting before he pulls away, and moves towards the coffee Maz has made for him, familiar with surgeons waking and needing caffeine at odd times in this house.

She and her mother are pulling lasagnes out of the oven, ready to feed everyone in time for Finn to head into work for the night and as they sit to cut into the saucy, cheesy mess of pasta, Ben starting with a cup of coffee to wake up a little, everyone else pouring wine and water, she could almost cry, feeling Ben’s hand squeeze her thigh as she sits beside him.

_Is it all real?_ she thinks, remembering Finn’s conversation from days earlier. _Will it last?_

She runs a hand affectionately through her man’s hair while he sips his coffee like it’s morning, and she takes a bite of her dinner.

******
Happy Friday!
Have a chapter.
*tosses the chapter down on the table, runs off. fast.*

PREVIEW 1st chapter coming EASTER SUNDAY of NEW Reylo Modern AU fic, "The North Shore" because the Easter bunny brings yummy treats. <3

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes
Dinner is being handed around the table and Ben Solo is feeling fine.
He is one well-rested, blissed-out man, sitting here with his family, his coffee and his beautiful girl beside him. Sometimes, he forgets how much good a night of decent sleep can do. Or, a decent day’s worth of sleep, as the case may be when you’re working nights.

The pain of his work situation, the way it feels like his head is in a vice that keeps getting cranked tighter and tighter colors everything, making everything seem futile and painful but, one good sleep and the world is on its axis the right way again.

He’s sipping coffee, smiling to himself for the first time in days as the lasagne gets passed around in front of him.

His hand is on Rey’s knee under the table and it jogs his brain.

He ate her out this morning before she sucked him off and the memory of her taste, her sounds, her face, her mouth come rushing back to him. The fact they shared this now, they saw each other’s faces in daylight as they each came, they made each other climax, it’s bonded them and it makes his heart race erratically.

It’s basically involuntary movement when his hand begins sliding up her thigh under the table.

Their family is in the room, his parents and her mom and Finn but, no one can see, right? And if they can, they’ll keep their damn mouths shut.

What do they expect? Have they seen this woman he’s in love with? Look at her! She’s the most beautiful girl on earth and she loves him back.

She loves him! He is remembering, she said she’s in love with him. It registers again, blooming fully and it inflates in his soul so fast it crushes to death all the other bullshit he’s been dealing with lately at work.

She loves him and he’s invincible.

“What?!” he hears his mother shout from across the dinner table.

Ben hasn’t been listening at all. He’s been totally consumed with thoughts of Rey and their morning together. Apparently, he missed something important. His hand freezes on Rey’s thigh as everyone falls silent but Leia.

“He broke off his engagement and he didn’t think to call and tell us?!” Leia is still shouting, directing her grievance at Finn but this drama clearly regards Poe, the only engaged one, who luckily is not around the table with them. Poe, who is king of drama like this.

She turns to Han, finding Finn of no further use, rendered speechless in the face of her outrage, “Han! What in the hell! How could he have done this? Did you know anything about this?,” Leia is predictably annoyed, at being alone in outrage and as usual she attempts to encourage similar feelings in Han.

Han rubs his chin thoughtfully.

“Well, I guess I knew he looked like one miserable son of a bitch around that girl,” he exhales hard through the nose, raises his eyebrows. “Can’t say I’m disappointed he won’t be marrying her.”
Huffing a laugh he says, “and now I don’t have to pay for anything.”

Dissatisfied with Han’s response, having been neither sufficiently forceful nor vitriolic enough, Leia rolls her eyes hard as she returns her attention to Finn who doesn’t look particularly excited to be on the other end of her cannons as she lets loose.

“When did he break up with her? Are they broken up or did they just cancel the wedding? Or did they just postpone it?”

Leia’s not getting answers fast enough about this and she’s about to blow her lid, Ben knows.

His blissed-out happiness is diminishing at the same rate as his coffee.

He’s known his mother long enough to know they have all been witness to the birth of a major event, even if Finn was only innocently mentioning Poe’s newly single status in passing between bites of his dinner. Tonight will be one long litany of phone calls, debates and conversations with anyone who will listen to his mother’s feelings about this latest drama in the epic saga of Poe Dameron Solo’s love life, and Ben wants to get the hell out of here as soon as possible, if not before, so as not to be included.

It’s selfish maybe but, he did not come home for this.

If you paid him, you could not make him care that Jess and Poe broke up except he’s mildly glad for his brother he dodged a bullet.

Rey interjects as soon as everyone has paused to take a breath, “Finn, I know you have to go in to work tonight. When do you need to leave? Need anything before you go?”

My sweet girl, Ben thinks, my sweet girl.

He knows she is rescuing Finn from Leia and he’s overwhelmed with a surge of love for her. He squeezes her knee and runs his hand up her hip, her side, her shoulder, up to the nape of her neck, under her hair where he rests his hand.

He channels all his adoration into his touch and she knows it, he can see it mirrored in her eyes as she turns and looks at him.
He loves the way she leans into him.

It makes him feel fucking bulletproof.

Everyone is dispersing and Finn gives Rey a knowing look before leaving the table, and Ben is the only one who sees it pass between the two of them.

“I’ll clean up,” Maz says before Han takes the dishes out of her hands and says “no way. My turn.”

He sends Leia and Maz to sit by the pool with their wine while Leia tries to contact Poe by any
means necessary to get the scoop from him about his broken engagement. Ben knows Han is dismissing Maz so she can bear the brunt of Leia’s ranting instead of him but, he definitely isn’t judging.

They are the last two at the table and Rey hasn’t moved an inch.

“Sleep well?” she asks him. She puts her palm over his heart and leans into him, gives him an Eskimo kiss with the end of her nose.

_She’s so goddamn adorable_, he thinks.

“I slept so well. I swear, I think you drugged me,” he smiles at her and he runs his fingers up into her hair at the base of her head where his hand is.

“Want to take a walk? Get some fresh air?” she asks him.

“Hell yes, sweetheart, anything,” he tells her. He takes her hand and she leads them outside.

Ben never thinks twice about taking her hand and twining their fingers together now. He doesn’t take it for granted, it’s a fucking privilege but, he doesn’t hesitate and he does it every chance he gets.

He hopes she has no hesitation to help herself to him, too.

They pass the pool and overhear their mothers deep in conversation with Poe. He’s on speaker phone as Leia’s phone lay between them on the lounge chair, and they can faintly hear Poe saying “…Jess is a lovely girl but, my heart wasn’t in it, Ma. Don’t you want me to be passionately in love?”

Ben walks faster, pulls them towards the dock before they can get roped into that circus. Rey pulls him the opposite way though, towards the grove.

“This way,” she has a playful look on her face and Ben is completely at her mercy. He lets himself get pulled along. His happiness tank is refilling.

“Han wants me to seriously consider moving into the yellow cottage,” Rey tells him as they walk. “He wants me to be available for my mother, which is really sweet. I don’t know if Finn would move in with me or whether he would stay where he is - Han says he doesn’t care - and I told him I want to think about it.”

Ben is processing a pros and cons list mentally while she talks, and so far he can’t come up with any cons but, she’s just verbally processing.

“I haven’t been inside in ages. Want to go see it with me?” she asks him and he nods.

A few steps later she asks a bit shyly, curious for his opinion, “what do you think?”
He lifts their joined hands, kisses her knuckles and looks at the cottage as they approach. “I think wherever you are, that’s where I am spending every minute possible.”

The yellow cottage sits at the far southwest edge of the property, past the aging orange grove, 100 feet from the seawall separating the estate from the Gulf and an impressive drop-off. Han had a fence installed along 300 feet at that end of the property since Maz’s pink cottage borders the other end of the grove, just as a precaution. It’s a craftsman-style bungalow, wide front porch and tapered columns supporting a rusty aluminum roof.

The paint is faded, the trim is sky blue and white and the whole thing gives the general impression of sunshine in a way Ben wouldn’t have normally be drawn to but, it fairly screams of Rey and as soon as he thinks about it he knows it must have been made for her, even if it was built 85 years ago.

They rummage under the doormat and find a key, and unlock the front door. It’s too warm, it must be over 80 degrees inside and almost pitch dark and empty and when Ben closes the door behind himself, it’s silent as a tomb.

He can hear them breathe, shuffle and bump into walls as they meander, hands still linked. They both have a sense of the bungalow’s layout, similar to Maz’s and they instinctively make their way through the small house to the rear where the kitchen has a glass-paned wooden door and rusty, old screen door which leads to a patch of dead grass and wilting pygmy palm trees.

Beyond that patch of yard though, is the Gulf and they can see and feel it the instant they open the back door. He slides the catch to hold the screen door open, it’s five degrees cooler this way, and they both stand a little frozen, the moment falling like a parachute settling around them.

The waves are far out, it’s low tide, and the moon is a white oval over the water.

He slips his arms around his girl as she stands framed in starlight in the doorway, feels her waist under his forearms and feels the Gulf breeze rustle through his hair and time stops and he grasps the concept of a perfect moment.

They’re alone.

This is not his mother’s house or his father’s yard or anyone else’s anything.

There’s no one here, no one within earshot, and she loves him and he loves her and this is her house and their water and Ben Solo is home.

It’s like she’s read his mind because she turns in his arms and pulls his face close and he can feel her love for him in the heat of her gaze.

“No. Will you leave me?” she asks, so serious.

It hits him in the gut, she’s been working up the courage to ask him this, he hears it in her voice. Ben
wants to punish himself till he bleeds he’s so mad at himself for making her need to ask him this.

He should have told her.

He should have told her a million ways by now, she should never have to ask him this, she should know it.

It’s a question so defenseless, so dangerous he’s overcome with awe at her courage.

He knows her.
He knows her birth story and the trauma and how hard she’s worked all her life, in a way never required of him with his entitlement of two parents, to wrestle with it.
And yet, he made her ask him this.

He’s shaking his head, eyes squeezed shut nearly in pain, touching her hair, trying hard to imagine what she would say to him if the roles were reversed. He wants to imitate what she would do, what she would say.
“Rey…”

She interrupts, explaining, “it’s not a fair question, I know. I don’t even know why I’m asking, it’s not like you have a crystal ball. It’s just that I’m nervous, I’ve never been here in this kind of love before - ever - and there’s so much to lose. And people leave other people. Sometimes. My parents left me. Other people too, have left me and I…”

She stops herself, she knows she’s rambling.

Ben is at a loss, trying so hard to gather evidence to offer her, to assure her every way possible.
He feels so inadequate, he’s seconds from being entirely useless.

And then he remembers she loves him and invincibility sweeps into his brain again and he takes himself by the shoulders and commands himself to do his job and he tells her.

“Baby girl. You? You are mine.”

He waits. He lets it land.

She’s breathing and looking into his eyes, the waves are rolling calmly under a navy blue sky behind her and it’s all silent, she’s silent, thinking.

“I should have told you the first minute I saw you in the kitchen that night you came home. I knew then. I just heard your voice and I knew, before I even looked at you. I should have walked up to you and grabbed you and looked in your eyes right then and said ‘Rey, I swear to God, I will die before I lose you again.’ I should have gotten on my knees” he gets down on both knees in front of her, wraps her up in his arms, “and wrapped my arms around you and told you baby girl, I have waited so long for you. I will never let you go again because I think I have known you are what I
need. You are mine.”

She’s looking down at him on his knees, and her hands are on his shoulders, his hands on her hips, and tears are welling up in her eyes, Ben can see them sparkling like diamonds in the corner of her eyes and they wink at him to continue, they whisper to him what she needs.

“This - what’s between us - this isn’t dating. I’m not going to fucking break up with you and move on. This isn’t some ‘let’s try it’ or ‘I really like you’ bullshit. This is It for me, you are It for me, Rey. And if that freaks you out you’d better tell me right fucking now because sweetheart, listen to me because I fucking mean it, you are mine.”

Rey’s tears are falling.

She gets on her knees too, and cries and her man kisses her and she whispers “I love you” and he kisses her and she says “I need you” and he kisses her.

She pulls her shirt over her head and pulls her shorts off and drags his shirt up his body and tears it off and he kisses her.

She pulls at the waistband of his pants and he moves to unbutton them and pull them off and he kisses her.

They hold and clutch and possess each other while they are on their knees in the dark, silent kitchen, the waves keeping time, telling them they are safe, only lace and cotton separating them, and he kisses her.

His hands run over her skin, every inch, he pulls at her panties, her bra, pulls the elastic from her hair, nothing but her naked in his arms and he kisses her.

He sits against a cabinet door and removes his last piece of clothing and pulls her onto his lap and he kisses her.

She sinks onto him, hungry and beautiful and perfect and his and he kisses her.

She’s everything, he thinks.

“You are mine, baby girl,” he tells her as he meets her over and over, in time with the waves outside.

Just before she comes in his hand between them while he’s still inside her, he kisses her and when he watches her throw her head backward in bliss he kisses her.

He lays her down on a bed of discarded clothes and ancient linoleum and dust and memories and he kisses her. While he shadows her face with his body and while he keeps the rhythm the Gulf has suggested and when his body claims her, and marks her, and fills her, and names her his own he kisses her.

I love you. I need you. You are mine. I am yours.

It’s all they repeat as Ben holds his girl in the dark until the tide goes high and deafening and he swears to her again with his body, she is his.
Before dawn, Ben and Rey walk back to the big house hand-in-hand.

This is no walk of shame.

This is a new day of freedom and revelation and they are high as a kite and sleepy.

They take off their clothes and climb into Ben’s bed together and fit like two pieces of one puzzle long-overdue for completion, belonging to one another so utterly complete there are no questions left to answer, no qualms left to face, no quandaries to ponder.

They reach for each other and blend into one another like clouds melding in the sky, looking into one another’s eyes until they are so heavy they can’t fight it anymore, and they both fall sleep.

They both sleep past 11 and each wake to several texts they ignore for the moment.

Ben wakes with a lighter soul than he can ever remember feeling in his life, a shocking awareness he’s reached his forever, he’s done it, she’s here, he made it, finally, and a deep relief to his core accompanying that knowledge.

He’s run a race and won and his prize is beside him, in his bed, in his reach.

He’d be tempted to think it too good to be true but, nothing could be truer than this woman, than his fevered love for her, for what she does to him, what she’s always done to him.


She’s face down on the pillows of Ben’s bed. He never wants her sleeping anywhere but his bed again.

He’s accustomed to weird sleep patterns, it’s fine, so he kisses her hand where it lay on his pillow beside his face, pulls on old jeans and a clean t-shirt and goes to get them coffee downstairs.

“Benjamin,” he hears his mother.

Ugh, he thinks, knowing when she says his name like that it rarely means good things will follow. Need coffee first, he thinks.

“Would you two please read your texts when you’re both up? And text me back please?” she pats his arm, grabbing her white coat and purse as she heads to the back door adding, “you need a haircut.” before she walks out to her car.

Good Lord, he thinks.

He takes both mugs upstairs, locking the bedroom door behind him.

He kicks off his jeans and pulls off his t-shirt and gets back into bed with his girl.
Both of them look at their phones, side-by-side as they sip coffee, backs against Ben’s headboard. Last night’s Poe drama must be over or something because this is something completely different. Leia has texted them two different versions of the same invite.

To: Rey
From: Leia
7:19 am
R, am heading to Miami next weekend with Han. We’d both like your help - Can you come with? Our treat xoxo L

To: Ben
From: Mom
7:22 am
Sweetie, next weekend I am running post-op check-up cleft lip & palate clinic in Miami. Would love you to see/help. I’ll put you & Rey up somewhere nice $$ if you come. Mom

Well, that just exhausted him all over again. It will require too much brainpower to remember what next weekend is? Isn’t next weekend something?

Too much thinking, he thinks.

His coffee isn’t half-gone when he puts it down on the bedside table anyway. He puts his phone next to it, he takes Rey’s phone from her hand and stacks it on his, and he rolls his face into her stomach and wraps his arms around her.

Abruptly, he shocks her as he shoots up, reaches for their phones again briefly, silences them both and settles his face into her stomach again. He feels her laugh at him. He hears her place her own coffee on the table beside her. She struggles underneath him until she is flat and eye-level with him again.

This time, since it’s bright beyond the window, and nothing is hidden from view, they can gaze into one another’s eyes, held steadfast, sinking, drowned as they meld into one and weave, and rend one another in pieces slowly, agonizingly, melted down, refashioned and fired in a blaze into one whole body.

He whispers how he loves her, needs her, belongs to her. She tells him how she’s longed for him to take her, possess her, how she has yearned to yield to him.

There will be another time for fierce and reckless and helpless, too unabashed and enraptured to be bothered with decorum and then, another, again for tormenting, Ben’s decidedly merciless version of
payback for the vixen she was as a teenager, hands pinned and hips held trapped as he plunders her, thrilled and winded beneath him as he spends himself showing her what it is to be taken by a man whose practiced self-control has been finally, utterly, gloriously disarmed.

He tells her how she teased him, plagued him, haunted him. He demands to know how she touched herself and how and where and to what thoughts of himself, victorious. She whispers how she imagined him, dreamed of him, held it all so close. She insists he’s free to consume her now, take everything, pay her back, freed.

She learns what it is he needs, what he actually craves, what it is to be caught in a tidal wave of his unrelenting muscle locked around her body, and his heartbeat pounding inside her own body as he gasps, lips open on her mouth, forehead pressing against hers, breath gone and she’s never known the break of waves more perfect than the completion she finds around him inside of her.

They love each other and they take their time and Ben is in no hurry to move on with the day and they do not text Leia back in a timely manner and they do not drink their coffee. It turns cold, sitting ignored.

******

“What do my parents want, do you know?” Ben asks Rey around 2 pm when they are climbing out of bed.

It’s not like they’re going for a record or anything, he just can’t stop trying to fuck her now that he’s started. He’s a numbers guy, after all, and just because he’s fucked her four times since last night - five, if you count how he ate her out yesterday morning - and he’s maybe feeling fucking proud of the numbers that’s not such a bad thing.

He’s ravenous for her, for all she can give him and all he can give to her because it’s like drinking from a fire hydrant on a summer day: you think you’ve drunk all you can but, then you catch your breath and you’re still boiling and you’re dying to be gasping for air again.

He wants her all the ways, all the positions, all the rooms, all the surfaces. He wants her on her knees and bent over and on her back and above him. He keeps thinking about how it’s been nearly four years since she turned 18 and he feels deprived. He could have been fucking her for four years now and it makes him hate California, hate anything that kept them on separate coasts a minute longer than necessary.

“I have no idea,” she tells him as she pulls on her panties followed by a bra. He pulls his boxer briefs up and sits on the edge of the bed, leaning back on an elbow lazily, watching her, appreciating.
When he’s looked at his phone he’d seen his texts from his mother and Snoke received in tandem with one another, hours apart and directly opposed to each other, each proposing use of his time next weekend.

Well, his mother’s was a proposition, manipulative though it was to bribe him with a getaway with his girl, Snoke’s came off more dictatorial which, that’s his boss after all, he supposes that makes sense.

He’s still smarting from his conversation at Snoke’s a few days prior, it was a blow to his confidence and a threat to his career and when he thinks about it even his mother couldn’t hold a candle to Snoke’s mastery of the art of manipulation.

His mother offers him a hotel room with his girl, Snoke threatens his livelihood so yeah, maybe they’re both surgeons and they’re both bossy as hell but, he’s never seen a better example of the fact Snoke and his mom aren’t playing with the same rulebook.

“What do you think?” he asks her. “Want to go with them?”

“I think I’ll go anywhere with you, man,” she tells him and leans her palms on the bed, locks her elbows, bends to him and kisses his mouth.
He has no response to that but a smile against her lips.

*Invincible,* he thinks, *I may be fucking invincible.*

He almost flexes his arms just to discharge this testosterone-fueled ego fest.

He watches her ass as she walks to the door of his room and leaves through it, heading to shower where she can access her clothes and toiletries and he hears her running down the hallway between their rooms, her barely-covered little body hurrying to remain unseen. She’s too sweet to be intentionally indiscreet. He needs to get her somewhere she can laze around naked without bashfulness.

Like a hotel.

In Miami.

He makes his decision.

*****

To: Mom
From: Ben
2:25 pm
Sounds good.
We’re in.
Ben
To: Snoke, M.D.
From: Ben
Dr. Snoke, thank you for the invite.
I am unavailable for travel to D.C.
Again, it is appreciated.
- Solo

To: Ben
From: Mom
3:01 pm
Wonderful!
Thrilled!
Mom

*****

It’s fine by Ben his parents are already gone from the estate when he arrives after an entire week away from her, ready to bring Rey with him to Miami to meet them.

He’s more than ready for unadulterated, solitary, concentrated access to his girl and he’s not opposed to stopping on the way to Miami to get his hands on her and eat her out and fuck her. It feels a bit like he’s got emphysema, he imagines, like his lungs can’t fill up all the way and everything is a low-key struggle, that many days without her. He wants to commit never to go a week again but, he knows that’s unrealistic.

Not for the first time, he fantasizes living with her, marrying her, locking this whole thing down as fast as he can. Every time he asks for more of her body, her soul, her heart she offers it freely, like she enjoys being devoured by him - only him - and it feeds an ambitious insatiability in him.

More than once this week he’s been jolted back to reality with his hands wrist-deep in someone’s abdominal cavity, blood and guts all over his gloves, his mind two hours north with Rey in bed.

That’s not safe, he’d thought, cringing behind his surgical mask.

“Baby, oh my God,” she whispers into his ear as he picks her up in his arms in an embrace in the foyer, her feet swinging. He can hear in her voice she’s feeling every ounce of what he’s feeling. Sheer relief.

“Yeah, that was too long apart. No good,” he muffles into her hair.

They’re standing in the same spot, still kissing each other senseless when he feels his brother smack him extra painfully on his back, harkening back to their days as kids when they’d hurt each other on
purpose while wrestling just for the hell of it.

“Hey,” Poe greets Ben casually, eating his way through a handful of crackers. “Good thing you’re here. The Mouse was a royal pain in the ass whining about you the last 2 days.” Rey smacks his arm to tell him off and turns to walk into the kitchen, both Ben and Poe following.

“Thanks for being here this weekend,” Ben tells his brother and Finn as they walk into the kitchen, where Finn is eating the same crackers and a handful of cheese cubes.

“Yeah, no worries, we’re just gonna lay out by the pool, play X-Box, eat junk food. It’s no big,” his bother says casually, sitting down.

No way would Rey have been comfortable leaving Maz for the entire weekend when Leia and Han were with her on the other coast, so he means it when he tells Poe and Finn thank you for staying at the estate.

It’s not that Maz needs babysitting exactly, it’s just that they’ll be four hours away and it’s too far to get home in a hurry, in an emergency. He’s thankful his brother has always been a team player.

“Let’s hit it, baby girl,” he tells Rey as he picks up her bags, heading to the door. Enough of this, he’s ready for alone time with her.

He hears Rey telling Maz she loves her, to text her, reminding her let the boys walk her home to the pink cottage tonight, take her meds, tells her she loves her again and Ben shouts from the door where he’s waiting for Rey, “Yeah, thanks, Maz!” realizing she’s parting with her daughter all weekend and he’s thankful.

He gets her all to himself for four solid hours on the car ride to Miami.

He listens to her talk about her time at the marina this week, how she’s helping restock and organize and clean out supplies for donations before she starts full-time next week when the marina reopens. He listens to her play him a song through his Bluetooth she wants him to hear because she says it reminds her of him. He listens to her talk about Finn, tell him stories she hasn’t told him before, hears her talk about what her plans are for the yellow cottage, and how she imagines it an escape for him when he comes home.

He spills his guts about work, about Snoke and his condescending, demanding assholery, about how he’d threatened Ben’s job thinly and about how he doesn’t want Ben “distracted”. He purges it like verbal vomit and she strokes his hair and squeezes his neck hard and runs her fingertips over his ear as he drives and listens and he feels so much better afterward it’s like getting over the stomach flu.

With his car in fifth gear on the highway, he can reach over and touch her shoulder, her cheeks, her hair, he can run his hands over her knees, her thighs, run his fingers against her sweet pussy through her clothes, hold her hand, brush the back of his hand over her tits, wait a second for her nipples to respond to him and fucking do it again to feel them.

It’s basically the best car ride of his life.
She navigates with her phone as he drives them off the interstate and into the city. Leia texted them the address in the medical district of some renowned, Cuban deli in the heart of Miami, “Best Cuban sandwiches in all of Florida” which Han had been hoping to hit up for a sandwich and Leia has been hoping will serve to let them discuss the plan for the next day.

Tomorrow, Han and Rey have an appointment to look at a boat he’s thinking about buying and Ben and Leia have six hours of post-op clinic right across the street at the medical center, to run for her cleft patients. After they get a bite to eat and satisfy his parents, they’ll head to their hotel and check-in.

Ben’s only condition of coming on this trip was they stay somewhere his parents were not. Rey’s only condition was Ben not answer any texts from work.

“Hey!” Rey greets his parents after he’s pulled her to the back of the restaurant where he’s spotted his parents already at a table. She kisses them both and he kisses his mother’s cheek, too and they sit in the wicker chairs around a round café table with them. It’s a little jarring, seeing his parents so out of their natural element. He’s never been to his mom’s clinics around Florida before, never actually worked with her as colleagues before, though he and Poe both shadowed her and her partner, Dr. Holdo occasionally during intern year.

This weekend will be a new experience in a lot of ways.

Ben’s never vacationed with his parents and a girlfriend together before, though this isn’t exactly a vacation and Rey isn’t his girlfriend so much as his lifeblood and oxygen but still, it’s an entirely new sensation being two couples out to lunch across from each other in a foreign place as opposed to around the kitchen table.

His parents look different to his eyes in a new environment, too. Ben’s used to seeing his mom in scrubs with her hair braided back for surgery but, her hair is down around her shoulders, loose and she’s got on a tailored pink and mint green Polo shirt with khaki pants.

His dad looks normal, navy cargo pants and a tan Columbia button-down fisherman’s shirt but, damn, has he always been this gray? Ben rarely thinks of his parents as old, more like stubborn and over-the-hill but, he’s also used to seeing them in the same habitat he grew up seeing them in. In a new setting, he has to admit, his father looks straight up old, gray, tired.

He needs to ask Rey if she’ll mind when he’s that age because he’s undoubtedly going to look much like his dad when he’s 70.

Is that weird, to ask if she thinks his dad is good looking?

Ben drapes an arm around Rey’s shoulders and orders a Cuban sandwich and a Cerveza beer and leans back, takes a deep breath, thinks how nice it is to be with his girl no matter where they are, what they’re doing, how nice it is he can be in any situation and she fits him. Rey tucks herself under his armpit closer and he tunes into what his mom is saying.
“So, we told him we’re proud of him and we’re behind him no matter what and if he wants to be single that’s fine and that’s that, I guess,” Leia is saying. She’s talking about Poe and the end of his engagement to Jess. Sounds like everything is nice and neat and tied with a bow.

*So, that’s over and done with.* Ben thinks. *Good. Let’s move on.*

Their food arrives and everyone digs in, quiet while their brains send blood to their bellies and this place isn’t kidding - these are some delicious Cuban sandwiches, no joke.

When the talking starts again everyone is more relaxed, less jittery. This is normal, they eat together all the time at home, all four of them. Just because they’re somewhere new and it’s just four of them without Maz and Poe and Finn and Chewie, they can be normal. Food in their stomachs and something to do with their hands helps.

“So, Ben,” his mother begins, wiping her mouth. “I don’t know how much experience you’ve had down there with Dr. Snake,” she emphasizes, implying that wasn’t a slip of the tongue, “with children and clefts, but I can send a quick article to your email for you to read before tomorrow regarding post-op follow-up to refresh your memories from school.”

Ben swallows some beer. “Basic post-op should look the same for anyone. I’ll know what to look for. Bleeding, oozing, infection, I know the drill.”

“Oh, it’s not that simple, son. I’ll send you the article.”

“Mom, I know what post-op wound care means, I don’t need to read an article to understand the healing process,” pointing to his own chest, “M.D., also, remember?”

He doesn’t want to spend his night alone with Rey in a hotel looking over some stupid journal article he could’ve written in his sleep. He wants to get laid. Repeatedly, hopefully.

“Well, forgive me for not trusting whatever the hell it is you’re learning down there with that worthless excuse of a physician.”

Everybody swallows their bites of food and stops before taking another bite. Ben sits up straighter in his chair.

“The fuck does that mean?” he asks his mother.

“Ben…” his father warns. It’s the tone he uses right before he tells his sons not to speak to their mother that way.

“It means he’s a nasty, conniving, arrogant son of a bitch and I wouldn’t trust him farther than I could throw him.” Leia clearly has an opinion on this and she’s allowed but, this feels like a personal commentary on Ben’s choice of mentor and that’s incredibly insulting.

“So, what you’re saying is, I work for a shit person and I’m getting shit training and you’re the queen
of plastic surgery and you know everything," he’s getting steamed.

Rey places her hand on his knee but stays quiet. He knows she’s trying to settle him down but, this is heading somewhere he wants to follow. He wants these questions and the answers to them and if this is where it has to happen, then this is where it has to happen.

“Benjamin, please," Leia sighs with an eye roll, "that’s not what I’m saying at all, you are a fine physician. I am just saying I cannot handle that man, he is an asshole, and I’m not afraid to tell you I have had more than one patient transfer care to me after he’s opened them up and they’ve been filled to the brim with scar tissue. I had one patient, I swear to God, I thought she’d never heal. I know full well I am not the only quality plastic surgeon out there, I know that. Poe has some incredible attending physicians in his program in Laketown,” she announces as if she hasn’t just stepped on a landline.

Rey can feel Ben fuming, and she whispers “Ben. Baby,” a final attempt to change his direction but, the winds are pulling him way out to sea and it’s too violent a storm brewing to turn back now.

“Here we go,” he says to his mother.
“Here we have it. Precious golden boy Poe can do no wrong. Poe, who just fucking unceremoniously dumped a fiancé and didn’t bother to fucking tell you about it, waltzes around like he’s God’s gift to women, but he can do no wrong. He can do whatever the fuck he wants but me? I fucking work my ass off, more hours in a week than Poe works in two in a fucking demoralizing, exhausting surgery program, and it doesn’t matter! It never matters because I’m Ben! I’m not Poe, I’ll never be your Poe, so I’ll never be your favorite, is that right, mom? Huh? I’ll never be good enough, is that right?”

He’s done now and his chest is heaving.

He’s stomped over to the base of the hurt and yanked it out by the roots and thrown it on the table between all four of them.

People are probably looking. Fine. His mother’s eyes are blazing and they’re both breathing hard, trying to maintain composure.

They’re locked in a battle of wills and stares and Ben hears Rey urgently beside him.
Her tone has changed.

“Ben!…” he tears his eyes away from his mother’s to look at Rey but she’s staring across the table at his father.

Han is white as a ghost. He’s stricken. He’s standing. He’s holding his left arm. He’s breathing shallowly. 
Ben jumps up, everything else disappears.

“Dad, Dad…,” Ben hears his own voice.

Han is so pale. His eyes are glazing over.
He reaches out towards Ben and Ben screams over his shoulder “call 911!” and he feels his dad slipping to the ground as he catches him in his arms.

"Dad! Come on Dad, come on. I got you, I got you…” he lowers his father to the ground, catches his head gently with his hand and rips his father’s shirt open, buttons flying.

“Fucking hell somebody get me a goddamn ambulance!” he screams over his shoulder again, his voice booming.

He checks for airway, breathing, circulation. Han is staring at the ceiling, he’s still and limp on the floor.

“Han! Han! Oh my God, oh my God, Han! SOMEONE HELP, HELP, HELP, we need an ambulance, he needs an ambulance NOW! Please God, no, please God, no, Han!” Leia is chanting behind Ben as he pumps his father’s heart, she’s screaming for his father like he’s lost somewhere far away, interrupting herself to fade back and forth, both a surgeon who is commanding a room around her while also a wife who is terrified.

He can feel his father’s ribs cracking under his hands as he pumps blood through him.

He’s imagining his own hands torn open, his blood flowing down through his fingertips, into his father’s dry heart.

He’s picturing his father’s heart and the direction the vessels and chambers should be moving, he’s visualizing his father’s lungs expanding and moving air and he’s dripping heavy tears down onto his father’s skin as he’s bent over doing compressions.

“COME on, Dad. COME on, Dad. COME on,” under his breath fiercely, with every compression, Ben is begging Han to live.

Ben keeps pushing and pushing, his arms are shaking and he can’t feel any ribs left anymore, he’s probably ground them to powder but he just keeps pumping his father’s heart for him through his chest, keeps the rhythm he knows to be right and strong and concentrates on keeping his elbows locked, his back strong, his eyes moving from his father’s face to his chest back and forth.

When he sees the paramedic across his father’s body, telling him “I got it, you can stop, I’m resuming compressions” he almost can’t make his muscles stop compressions, they just stay contracted.

He sits back on his heels, his arms so tight he can barely move them, so lightheaded he almost falls over, everything momentarily fuzzily black around him as he moves to make room for the gurney and the paramedics.

He stumbles to his feet and Rey catches him. She and Leia are knotted together, arms around one another, tears flowing endlessly down both their faces, both sobbing, Leia wailing and bargaining with God.

He hugs them both to his chest helplessly as they pant for breath and all three watch as Han is loaded into the ambulance, lights, and sirens blaring, taking him away from them in a heartbeat.
thank you to my darling beta sister, uselessenglishmajor <3
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 9
Insolent

When Rey was 11, she remembers their first significant conversation about Maz’s husband, Jose.

Maz often referenced him in the day to day, remembering her husband fondly, commenting what he would have said in a certain situation, comparing him with some stranger’s comparable features, always with a fond look in her eye.

As long as she could recall, Rey had asked everything she could think about Jose, wondering about the man who would have been her father, had he lived long enough.

Having died so many years before Maz adopted her, Rey always imagined Jose in heaven, and she was pretty content with that visual of him in addition to the handful of photos Maz had shown her of him.

He’d been a farmhand once he had moved to Florida but, in Mexico, he had been the son of the mayor of the town he had grown up in and he had a distinguished air about him in the few photos Maz had from Mexico which he’d bought with him to America.

He had thick, wavy black hair and skin the color of almonds, deep eyes and what Rey always thought of as a kind smile.

Rey could only hear Han’s voice when she looked at Jose’s photos but, that was fine with her.

When she was 11, and asking particularly pointed questions, Maz drove her to central Florida where Jose was buried and they visited his gravesite. Rey had been shaken to see her mother so emotional about the experience, she wasn’t at all used to Maz crying openly or leaning on her for support in any way.

Maz was so strong, so independent and wise, it was sad to see her cry at the gravesite.

As they left though, Rey realized she herself had felt very little, except for her intense desire to help her mother feel better.

On the ride back to Long Beach Key, they had stopped for Slurpees at 7-11 and Rey had told Maz jokes in silly voices all the way home, satisfied with herself for successfully cheering her mother up by the time they pulled through the iron gates of the estate.

Now, sitting in the waiting room of the Miami medical center where she sat with Ben and Leia waiting for news about Han, she couldn’t help but think back to what Maz had gone through alone, at an age only a decade or so older than Rey was now, and her heart broke for what her mother had borne in Jose’s death.
She thought about the questions flying through her own mind right now - *would Han live? would he die? would they have to bury him? how would they each deal with losing him?* - and about the things he hadn’t lived to see yet - *his sons married, his future grandchildren, his retirement and Leia’s* - and she jolted, realizing Maz had mourned all these things for Jose alone and her heart, already shredded, started to disintegrate even more.

The depth of silence in the hospital waiting room was deafening.

Only the sound of the overhead speakers, carrying random medical personnel pages and people passing in the hall outside punctuated the quiet, even the TV tuned to CNN was muted, and Rey thought you could almost hear the tick of each second coming from the wall clock above the door.

Leia was pacing, unable to stop wringing her hands, occasionally crying and calling Poe and her brother in Oregon to give them the news.

Ben was in the chair beside Rey, his knees spread, his head in his hands hanging face-down, his dark hair a curtain around his face.

Rey pushed her shoulders back and raised her chin.

She brought herself back into the room, this godawful nightmare, and looked at her man and she gathered her strength around her like a cloak and decided he would have from her what she could give him - *all* she could give him.

*Chest up, eyes up, chin up,* she told herself, thinking back to her Navy training.

*Rey,* she shook herself out of it, *you get to love Ben Solo.*

*Your Ben.*

*Ben.*

Rey runs her hand through Ben’s hair softly and feels him lean towards her touch.

She leads his head to her lap and he lets her, sitting sprawled in a chair much too small for his tall frame, his torso leaned towards Rey with his head in her lap, Rey combs his hair away from his eyes and behind his ears.

“Ben, I love you, baby,” she tells him, and he doesn’t move an inch.

She whispers as tenderly as she can, knowing he wasn’t ever babied much, believing he needs it now. She wants to take care of him.

He’s silent, he’s not crying, he’s not moving, he’s just letting Rey touch him, adore him, speak faith into him, pour health into him.

She tries to permeate his palpable sadness with hope, tries to funnel her devotion and passion for him into her hands, tries to lift the burden off his frame she can almost see visibly sitting on him like an
Ben reaches up without turning and stills her hand, catching it mid-stroke through his hair.

Leia has stepped outside and they are completely alone in the waiting room when Ben asks with a cry in his normally-smooth voice,

“What if I killed him?”

Rey’s heart shatters all over again and she wants to curl him up in her lap and rock him to sleep and so she says all she can say and hugs him as closely as she can and only thinks a little about how she would blow away and disappear in anguish if she were Leia and he was Han and it was him in the cath lab.

She tells him *Ben, baby, you didn’t and you didn’t and you didn’t and baby, you didn’t do anything wrong and don’t blame yourself and please and I love you and I’m with you and I’ve got you, I’ve got you, I’ve got you and I will not leave you and baby, we are in this together* as she combs through his hair with her fingers.

Ben turns himself face-down in her lap, hidden completely, and she tries to pull all the pain from his soul with her fingers running through his hair.

He stays that way, face down, and Rey can feel his shoulders heave and his chest shake with sobs for another 10 minutes, as Rey whispers to him *she loves him so much, loves him like crazy, and she’s got him it’s ok, and every other loving thing she can think to say* until Leia comes rushing through the waiting room door, eyes blazing.

*****

The last time Leia had been in a hospital for a reason besides her career it had been 31 years ago. It had been sufficiently excruciating then, too.

When the cramping had started and she had the first inkling something was wrong, she was back home in their bathroom.

It was a Thursday evening and Han had taken her for a quiet evening out on the boat, they’d slow danced under the stars to his radio playing Percy Sledge’s “When a Man Loves a Woman”, and they’d made love under the stars.

She’d been six months pregnant and Dr. Howard told her the next day it had been a little girl.
Leia couldn’t bear to name her, she just referred to her as Baby Angel for the next 31 years and vacillated between forgiving herself, forgiving Han, and blaming herself and blaming Han ever since then.

When he took off, she was angry and then grateful and then resentful and finally despondent.

By the time she had gone back to work a week later, she had thrown everything she had into burying the agony. Chewie called her once a month to tell her where they were, and finally, Han had come home.

He had blamed himself and she had blamed herself and they weren’t dumb enough to know it had been either of their faults, it’s just what you do when you’ve made something so fragile and concealed and delicate that you love it in spite of being able to preserve its life.

Within two months he was sleeping beside her, and within a year she was pregnant again.

That time it was a little boy she lost.

She had lost her parents as a child herself, had been adopted and raised instead by the Organas on the estate, had led as happy and blessed a life as a little girl could have been given but, she knew what it was to lose people, even then and her whole life long she couldn’t seem to make it stop.

Both babies were gone and Han had fled, too.

Over the weeks and months that had passed after the second time, Leia believed it more thoroughly than she strictly should have: she lost people.

It was who she was, what defined her.

She couldn’t seem to make them stay, couldn’t seem to make it stick.

People slipped through her hands like water itself and she held on tighter and tighter until she willed herself to keep Ben’s pregnancy, she was convinced, willed her womb to hold him tightly and sufficiently until he was born a mere three weeks early, healthy and squalling and she almost came apart with relief.

A year later, when the social worker tried to warn her that Poe’s case may be complex, he may be removed after a while, Leia knew in the first moment she had looked at him that she would never, ever let him slip through her fingers.

These were her little boys, and she would be damned if she was going to lose either of them.

She claimed them hard and set her face like flint against the universe and insisted.
It had worked then, she was betting it would work now.

Leia Organa-Solo sat on a plastic chair in the hallway of the hospital where her husband was undergoing a heart catheterization and she talked to God.

She didn’t so much plead or pray as she did negotiate and present a case.

She argued with God he’d taken enough people from her already, hadn’t he? He had her babies, after all, and her parents, probably both sets, and so many other people she loved already. Her Gran. Her Pops. Her friend from medical school, Marilyn who had died last year. Her cousin Shelby when they were teenagers and her priest, Father Silviano five years ago.

Surely, surely he must spare Han.

God couldn’t do this to her, he wouldn’t, she couldn’t bear it, please God, please God, anything else, anything but her boys and Han, anything but her family, please God, please God, please.

She folded her hands, wishing she was the kind of religious person who carried prayer beads, wishing she had anything to do with her hands besides twist them together, calling on her boys for support, and waiting, waiting, waiting to know if God had adjudicated her case positively or if today she had lost the one she knew in her heart of hearts, she could never have survived losing.

*****

“He had a major M. I. with 100% occlusion of the L.A.D.,” the cath lab doctor is telling the three of them in the waiting room, now that Han’s procedure is over.

The medical jargon makes immediate sense to Leia and Ben but, Rey is lost.

“Ummm..” she quietly inserts, searching faces, hoping someone will translate.

“A myocardial infarction, his left anterior descending was completely occluded. That’s the one we call ‘The Widowmaker’,” the doctor tells her, not understanding she needs it in terms even more accessible.

She feels like an uneducated child, the only one present in this huddle who isn’t in on the lingo and because she’s aware there’s more to cover and she’s holding things up, she knows can’t ask him to dumb it down further, so she just nods.

Mercifully, Ben looks down at her, his eyes bloodshot and face dry but swollen from crying and explains quickly, “he had a heart attack, a serious one.”

He squeezes her hand. He’s never ashamed of her, and she leans hard into him, nodding.
Ben still looks so heavy-hearted and it’s tearing Rey up from the inside out.

“We got the whole clot, put in two stents, should be good to go. Great prognosis. He’ll need all the routine restrictions and meds but, you did good work in the field. He’s a lucky man,” he is saying when Leia cuts him off abruptly, unapologetically.

“Can we see him?”

“They are taking him up to the cardiac floor now. They’ll call that phone right over there when he’s ready for you in his room, just listen for it to ring and pick up, they’ll tell you where to head,” he tells them.

They all thank him profusely, handshakes all around and Rey searches Ben’s face to gauge how he feels, knowing he’s an inch closer to the situation then she is, and also hoping to understand whether Han will be ok based on his reaction to this news.

She feels him exhale heavily, shakily and he leans down to her, forehead-to-forehead and rolls his head against hers, eyes squeezed shut and she hears him say “thank you, God, thank you, God, thank you, God” and she understands: Han will live.

******

Rey hangs back politely when Leia and Ben rush Han’s bedside for the first time when they are finally allowed to see him in his room on the cardiac monitoring room on the 7th floor of the hospital.

He is hooked up to machines that beep, take measurements and send him fluids and medications but he looks startling good. Actually, he looks incredibly alive and he is in surprisingly excellent spirits.

It’s only a few moments though before Han sees Rey hanging back, giving Ben and Leia space when he pushed Ben aside a bit and looks towards the door where Rey is standing and says,

“Little girl, get the hell over here,” and Rey sheepishly obeys, laying her head on Han’s chest when she reaches him and she feels her tears sliding across the bridge of her nose accompanying her smile as he pats her head gingerly.

“Han, how are you, honey?” Leia asks, her tone more lovingly reverential than either Ben or Rey can remember hearing in recent days.

“I am one lucky son of a bitch, I’ll tell you that much, that’s how I am. And, actually, I don’t think I knew how shitty I was feeling till I woke up after my procedure and I feel so much better. Except my ribs hurt like a motherfucker so, thank you for breaking every one of them, son,” Han tells Ben with a smile belying his sarcasm.

“Anytime, Dad,” Ben is trying to sound cavalier to offset the intense terror and incredible relief felt in the last five hours but, Rey hears the strain in his voice and she takes his hand in both of hers.
“Han, you scared the shit out of me. I swear to God, Han. I swear to God…” Leia is welling up again, gripping Han’s hand and Rey has the distinct feeling she is intruding on a moment more precious she has ever seen between them before.

“Princess,” he tells her, “you’ll have to try harder than that to get rid of me,” and his signature lopsided smirk at her means he’s himself.

He’s not only survived, he’s Han.

“Dad, do you need anything?” Ben asks.

Rey has the feeling Ben’s fighting a barrage of lies internally, swatting them off like an attack of pestilence about his guilt that his dad is in the hospital with ten different wires poking out of him, and he’s channeling his doctor mentality to try to be logical, efficient, focused, but, there’s so little he can contribute and he looks a bit like his body can’t decide if he should be totally spent or restless.

“No, no, no - I don’t need a damn thing,” Han says, and he’s actually is tired, Rey can see a hint of it now that the initial greeting is cooling and instinct tells her Han’s body could use rest to heal.

They could all use rest.

A nagging beeping grabs their attention and Leia pushes the call button to ask a nurse to come address it while telling Han, “I need to call Poe and tell him how you are,” and when the nurse arrives she asks for several arrangements to be made including bedding for herself to stay at the bedside with Han tonight.

Even tonight, five hours after a heart attack, Han and Leia argue in front of Ben and Rey, and a very ambivalent nurse about whether Leia should stay or go to the hotel and maybe it’s because he’s in a hospital bed or maybe it’s because they had the scare of their lives but, Leia wins and the nurse goes to retrieve bedding for her to remain in the room with Han.

“You kids go,” Leia tells them. “I’ll stay with Han. Text us in the morning.”

She kisses both their cheeks and Rey holds her several beats longer than normal, sending her bonus measures of love and strength, mentally channeling Leia love from Maz who most likely doesn’t know about today’s event yet but, would want to hug her extra hard too, right now.

“Ben,” Han says as his son bends over him to say goodbye, gripping him with both hands around Ben’s biceps, holding him in place, “thank you.”

They are face-to-face and Ben is frozen, tightly held by his dad, eye-to-eye and they just stay there a minute, not saying anything else.

Leia and Rey look at one another and finally Ben nods, and pats his father’s arm and says, “we’ll be
back in the morning. Mom, text us any time, for absolutely anything you need.”

All the goodbyes are exchanged and Ben and Rey hear Han asking for the TV remote when they’re exiting the room and it seems as peaceful and normal a situation as they’ll have had the grace to be given as they leave and head for the elevator giving them escape for the night.

Almost an hour later, Ben and Rey unlock the door to the hotel room they’d reserved.

It’s almost 8 pm and Rey is trying hard to balance the sensations of walking into a hotel room with Ben for the first time ever, while also attempting to remain attuned to the trauma they’ve lived through and everything Ben must be feeling.

There’s been so little time to talk and process today, the whole day since lunch feeling like a tornado of highs and lows, and it’s a strange cocktail to mix in an unfamiliar setting.

The room is cool, almost chilly and decorated in deep purple and steel grey and it immediately makes Rey unbearably sleepy.

She decides to go with what her body is calling for and lead the way for her man.

Ben has been so quiet, so sadly compliant she wants him to shake out of this stupor but, she knows he is completely depleted.

Wordlessly, she closes the heavy drapes, turns off all the lights and pulls her man by his hand over to the big bed in the hotel room they’ve just stepped into. She throws everything off them they don’t need, keys, wallet, purse, suitcases, phones, pulls off his shoes and then hers, pushed him gently onto the top of the bed, over the covers, lays down next to him, and puts her head on his chest.

She feels him wrap his arms around her and the universe, which has already handed them one miracle today hands them another and is merciful and accommodating as they both instantly fall asleep.

******

It’s 10:30 pm when Rey wakes up, groggy but with all her faculties immediately at her disposal, directions and information ready and waiting behind her eyelids for her to access as soon as she opens her eyes from her nap with Ben, as if the nap had refueled her and clarified her steps during her restfulness.

She is clear-headed as she moves to the bathroom. Ben is still asleep but, he wakes when he hears the shower turn on and run hot.

Rey can see him sit on the side of the bed, his legs swung around, his head hanging limply, sitting in the pale light pouring in from the bathroom and she walks to him with as gentle a smile as she can find.

“C’mon, baby,” she pulls him to the bathroom and he assents, docile as a lamb.
He stops to press a kiss to her lips, a kiss of gratitude and sweetness, and she pushes him lightly to the shower. He takes a hint and she knows he’ll keep moving forward to wash the day off himself as she closes the door, letting the room envelope him in steam and soap and a fresh start.

Rey walks to the phone and makes use of room service, calling up a large cheese pizza and a bottle of red wine.

When Ben walks out of the bath with a white towel around his waist and wet hair, pizza and wine are waiting and a couple lights are illuminated, Rey in her shirt from the same day and socks, having grown sick of her jeans and thrown them somewhere while waiting for her own shower.

Ben sits on the side of the bed and gives his girl a look of bewilderment and Rey walks over to him and for the hundredth time today, her heart wilts and cracks as she takes his face in her hands, cradling it and looking down into his endless eyes.

“You’re so good to me,” he tells her, brokenness tinting his tone, his hands dwarfing hers as they encircle her wrists that hold his face.

“Ben, baby, we are good to each other,” she corrects him.

The shower can wait. The food can wait.

Rey takes off her clothes while he watches her worshipfully.

She moves towards him and pulls his towel off, knowing they can heal one another with their bodies streaming health and love and power into each other better than anything else.

There’s never been anyone for Rey but Ben, not really, not ever, and she’s never been more truly herself than with his love holding her up, knowing her, possessing her so, she offers the best, truest version of herself to him, trusting she is what he needs as much as she knows in her depths that’s what he is for her.

When she kisses his lips, standing naked and secure, between his knees, his woman who loves him and belongs to him and knows what he needs and how to give it to him, he nearly cries.

His day has ruined him and she is his wholeness. He is guilty and she is his redemption. He is shamed and she is his pride.

She climbs on the bed, hands and knees, and looks over her shoulder at him. She pulls his hand from behind her, leads him forward and pulls him into her, giving, giving, giving until he believes her and starts taking for himself, just as she wants him to.

She is his strength now, she is his recovery, his way home and his freedom. She stands tall once he is inside her, reaches behind to him, pulling his head towards her ear, she pulls him closer behind her body, his breath hot beside her, his body powerful within her.
She is the listener to his secrets, the singer of his songs.

She presses harder into the wall of needy masculinity behind her, gathering him, spreading out around him.

She welcomes his hands as they wander, insist, take from her what he wants, her own arms thrown behind her, scooping him closer behind his head, a swimmer’s stroke reaching beyond the waves, as far as she can.

He can take as much as he needs, she has abundance for him.

He can be greedy, he can demand, he can grieve and depend and die and live again, be dark or the light, be moon or sun and she will be his constant, his accomplice, his safety and he finds security in her love and it refuels him.

He is inhaling and consuming her. She embraces it, and she offers more. He is insatiable and she is an endless ocean.

“Take what you need, I’ll give it all to you,” she offers to him.

“You’re all I need, you’re all I need, you’re all I need,” he promises her.

He waits for her though, he needs her at the summit with him.

She feels him leave her empty, spin her onto her back on the bed in a breath, fill her with his intensity and press himself inside till she’s nearly blinded, breathless.

He does not go slowly but, he is deep, fathomless, only retreating from her the slightest before pressing so extreme within again and again and again she can’t speak.

His face buried in her neck, his hands wrapped desperately around her middle, he’s engulfing her and she invites him, drawing him, offering solace.

His mouth is devouring hers when they both shatter, high and hard and whimpering and fierce, in that instant, they swear it is indistinguishable, simultaneous, identical. Their hearts slam against each other.

They’re spent, they’re united, they’re a force.

They give each other what completes them and the man who leaves her body is fortified by her love, and she is high on her treasured man.

******
There will be no more tears tonight, Rey can feel how much benefit a shower and sex and pizza and wine have granted them both by midnight.

They’re both in white robes, in the middle of the night, clean and fucked-out and filled up with junk food and alcohol and love, the purest and best kind.

The worst day of their lives has given them a mixed blessing in this, and though they would never want to relive it, they both know how thankful they are to have had one another through it.

*God, I love him so much,* Rey thinks, overcome with a flush of devotion for Ben.

*There is no man for me but him.*

When sleep claims them again, Ben is curved around his girl, and Rey is a little, arched shell held perfectly by the water around her.

She floats in his love and his waves are calm around her.

They are calm because she has held him through the wildest storm of his life, and he has survived and she is content and they are both loved as deep as the Atlantic waters beyond them.

******

To: Mom
From: Ben
7:40 am

How was the night? How’s Dad? Any pain?

We will get a bite and be there by 9.

Can I bring you and/or Dad anything?

Ben

To: Ben
From: Mom
He’s fine, being a pain in the ass, normal.
We’ve eaten, take your time. We aren’t going anywhere.
xoxo to you and R
Mom

To: Snoke, M.D.
From: Ben

7:45 am
Dr. Snoke, my father has suffered an acute M.I. in Miami, prognosis fair. I am offering assistance to my family. I will return to work in one week. I will email the residency program secretary details.
Much appreciated
- Solo

To: Ben
From: Snoke, M.D.

7:50 am
Solo, your residency program attendance policy is non-negotiable.
Refresh yourself with policy as needed.
Must meet with you ASAP.
- Snoke
“Fuck,” Rey hears Ben mumble, looking down at his phone.

“What’s wrong?” she’s making her way through a chocolate chip muffin and orange juice, their second round of room service since check-in last night, having decided the world had thrown enough at them yesterday to warrant pampering today, and they’re still naked, under the sheets of the hotel room bed, recovering with food and each other’s proximity.

“Snoke is going to kick my ass, he’s pissed at me,” he tells her.

He closes his eyes and leans his head back, softly banging his head against the headboard.

“Oh, does he not know we just had a medical crisis?” she’s incredulous.

“He doesn’t give a shit about anything like that, he just wants me where he can utilize me and fucking mind-control me or something and there’s going to be hell to pay for leaving town and not being where he thinks I am supposed to be,” Ben tells her.

His groan of dread considering the repercussions of his actions is intense.

Rey considers his words.

“Where you’re supposed to be?” she asks, his words repeated back to him a question, and then before he can answer, “does he not know where you’re supposed to be is with your family? Ugh, what an epic asshole. He sounds like a real delight,” and then under her breath, “pathetic excuse for a man is what he is. Sad, really.”

She’s shaking her head a little, pitying anyone who is as heartless and brainless as his boss sounds, and refraining from hating him for causing Ben any addition trouble because he’s clearly such a dick, he must have a shitty life to make him so miserable.

Even in the Navy she’d been shown more kindness than this when she’d had a friend who needed a ride to the E.R. Her Commanding Officer had no problem granting her a day off to tend her friend, and that was so much more minor than this situation.

It’s so simple to her, so completely logical, so obvious, she just keeps eating her muffin, oblivious to Ben staring at her, lips parted, looking at her like she’s spoken Greek.

“What?” she doesn’t know what she’s said to make him look at her like she has two heads. Did she offend him?

“You just obliterated him. Like, you literally just shined a light on this whole thing,” Ben sounds like he’s telling her something important but, she’s not getting enough information.

What “whole thing”? she thinks.
She just looks at him, confused, as he continues.

“I’m supposed to be with my family,” he repeats her words.

“Yeah…?” she makes the word about five syllables to lead him further into explaining himself because *duh*, but his face breaks into a huge smile, an authentic, he’s-back, there-he-is, there’s-my-man, face-splitting smile and he leans down and kisses her hard, holding her head in place, sucks her lips into his mouth, hums a little into her, and breaks away telling her in a voice she hasn’t heard in 24 hours, “you taste like chocolate chips.”

He jumps out of bed, throwing the covers off, smiling, announces “I’m taking a shower. C’mon sweetheart, let’s get going,” clearly having decided their time is bed has concluded and Rey is so elated his mood is rebounded from all the burdens of yesterday and the injustice of his boss’ text, she doesn’t argue with him or question it at all.

******

“Hey, kids,” Leia greets them as Ben and Rey walk through the door of Han’s room on the 7th story cardiac floor.

He looks improved even since the day prior, which makes sense, and Rey can’t believe how much more robust Han looks than he has recently.

It occurs to her Han must have been falling ill slowly for some time, a descent which culminated in yesterday’s horrifying event but, which clearly must have been percolating gradually. She makes a mental note to herself to retain this observation for the future, to use as ammunition against Ben’s potential self-loathing in case he falls back into blaming himself for his father’s heart attack.

“Well, don’t you look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed!” Rey teases Han as she kisses his cheek. “Here, I brought you a balloon,” she tells him lightly as she places a colorful *Get Well* mylar balloon beside him on his wheeled table.

“Yeah, I’m as precious as a goddamn kitten. I’m ready to get the hell out of here, is what I am,” he tells them, shaking Ben’s hand hard in greeting.

“He’s been driving me crazy with this since 4 in the morning, demanding to go home. I keep telling him it’s not his decision to make but, whatever, you know he doesn’t listen to me,’ she tells Ben and Rey and then, turning to Han, “There’s no arguing with you, you ornery, old goat,” she finishes, directing her words to her husband, no venom behind them.

“Dad, you’ve got to stay till they’ve decided you can leave,” Ben tells his father matter-of-facty.

“Yeah, yeah,” his father sounds unconvinced.

“I got the doctor who rounded this morning to agree he can leave in the morning tomorrow if he’s
“Everything ok with you two?” Leia asks Ben and Rey.

“Yeah, we’re good,” he smiles, pulling Rey’s hand still in his, towards him.

“Think we’re going to head home today, if that’s ok? Did you need me to work the cleft clinic for you, mom?”

“Oh honey thanks, no, I canceled clinic. I’ll come back in a month or so and reschedule. You kids feel free to head back home, it’s fine. Poe is freaking out anyway, worrying about Dad. He’ll be glad you’re there to debrief him,” Leia tells them.

An hour later, Ben has had all the small talking and cooped-up conversing he can take and he takes a huge breath and looks at Rey.

“You about to ready to go, baby girl?”

They give hugs and kisses, they tell Han how happy they are he’s ok, they tell him how scared they were, how relieved they are, how he needs to listen to Leia and follow the doctor’s orders and they turn to leave and Han tells them at the door, before they walk through it,

“Be careful.”

“You got it, old man,” Ben tells his father from the door and winks at his mom.

Rey has him all to herself again and she breathes easy.

Han is ok, Leia is ok, she is ok and Ben is with her, leading her to the elevator, her hand in his.

She’s got this.

She’s got anything.

*****

The drive between Miami and Ft. Wells is roughly two hours and it feels wonderful to feel all that
concrete fly underneath Ben’s car as they speed along it.

When she was little, Rey remembers driving to Miami with her mother to visit some of Maz’s relatives and she can recall Alligator Alley had been a narrow, scary two-lane road through the Everglades.

She remembers seeing the chain link fence whiz by, hour after hour as they drove, and distinctly remembers seeing gators just behind the fence, their beady eyes and rippled reptilian faces watching them.

She remembers being afraid, unsure how much of the cosmos to count on, a child of broken heart and fractured trust and insecure attachment, wondering if Maz would protect her and keep her safe, but now, the Alley is four-lanes of walled-off, smoothed-out highway and she feels totally serene.

She knows logically there are just as many alligators, as well as all manner of snakes and other predators but, she’s a woman now, and she knows both how to handle herself in relation to the universe and how to protect those she loves.

As he drives, Ben expounds on his work plight, how it’s all felt like such a conundrum, such a dilemma of far-reaching implications, Rey is a little stunned he’s had the ability to hold this for so long on his own. It feels like he’s sharing something not only precious but cumbersome with her, and she delights in his trust in her.

“Do you think this makes me less of a man? Knowing what a shitty job I have and how my boss treats me like dirt?” he asks her, blinking between her face and the road as he drives, checking her over for a response.

“I mean, I couldn’t possibly think anything further from that, Ben,” she tells him. “Baby, you’re amazing. You’ve withstood all this pressure, all this demand without ever cracking and you’ve carried it with such grace, I am just speechless.” She’s running her hand into his hair, his eyes on the road.

“You’re saving lives, cutting people open, living an insane schedule, being the best man I know. A lesser man would have crumbled long ago. I wonder how I got so lucky to have grown up in time to have a chance to be your girl.”

“First of all,” Ben begins, “saying I’m ‘saving lives’ is a stretch. I’m mostly doing things like removing gallbladders and appendixes, I’m not doing brain surgery or something. Second of all, Rey, you are the living embodiment of beauty and light and sweetness in my world. What you bring to the table is far, far superior to what I bring. I just want to be worthy of you. So much. I can’t get over the feeling I’m just not,” he tells her.

“Ben. Please. You are talking to a woman whose parents trashed her, whose whole childhood was spent wondering if she was lovable, whose cute little mother is an uneducated Mexican immigrant, whose possessions all fit into a Huyndai, who’s got exactly two friends on earth and one man she loves with all her heart. And that is you.”
Their matching set of grievances with themselves settle like dust on the console under their elbows. Rey laces her fingers with Ben’s and lifts his hand to kiss his knuckles.

It’s quiet for a moment, Ben and Rey trading their losses, redeeming one another’s pain.

“Rey, you are so valuable. You are my gem, my jewel. You’re a gift to me, to Maz, to my parents… you’re a gift to us all, baby girl,” he tells her, looking at her too long while he steers, driving it into her eyes, “it was their loss, Rey. When they lost you, they lost everything,” he says, meaning her parents.

She runs her hand into his hair and receives his words, burrows into them, holds them close, plants them deep.

"What a pair we are," she smiles at his profile as he drives, his hand on her thigh.

“I don’t know where we are heading in life but, I know this. We are going there together, Ben Solo. You and me.”

“I love you,” he tells her.

“We love each other,” she smiles at the road in front of them as they drive.

******

Rey had never been to Ft. Wells Medical Center before they arrived there at 3 pm on the day they drove home from Miami.

Ben texted his boss, told him he was arriving and requested a meeting time.

By the time they arrived, hopped up on Starbucks and commitment, they were vibrating with a steely resolve to get some closure on the bullshit of their regrettable weekend.

Ben was hoping to get a few days’ worth of vacation time, some mercy and maybe a fucking break.

Rey was hoping to wrap her head around his life in Ft. Wells, gain some context, lay eyes on it and use it to help Ben gain perspective later if needed.

Ben told her this was a Level 1 Trauma Center, a 500-bed facility and he explained all of what the meant to her, even though it all boiled down to the fact that it’s big and impressive and you can get lost quickly in the endless, resonating, identical hallways and shiny elevators.

Inwardly, Rey felt she’d had enough exposure to hospitals to last a decade in the last day and a half but, no way was she not going upstairs to be with Ben while he met with Snoke.
He held her hand as he led them surely and professionally through the halls, his white coat the only suggestion he was a member of the staff at the facility.

“Should we be holding hands here?” she asked him as they walked the endless, white, polished hallways.

“Probably not,” he told her with a smirk and held her hand tighter.

They landed in front of a conference room labeled 304, Surgery Conf. Room and Ben stalled, taking deep breaths, staring at the white door in front of him.

“Hey,” Rey says to get his attention one last time, her voice and a glance from her enough to cause his smile, his confidence returning and he turned the knob to open the door.

She’s not sure what she expected, but this was a much nicer space then she imagined, she decided, and it was surprisingly warm, outfitted with cherry cabinetry lining the walls, stacks of thick books on every shelf, a wide bank of windows looking out over the glittering blue edge of the Gulf of Mexico in the distance.

There was a single, extensive dark wood table with a dozen executive-style, rolling armchairs flanking it, each vacant and just begging Rey to come take a spin but, at the far end she saw a man whom she knew instinctively to be Snoke, accompanied by two bored and severe-looking men wearing blood red-colored, head-to-toe scrubs, two on each side of Snoke, all wearing surgical caps.

Snoke broke the silence and Rey wracked her brain to think of what he reminded her of as he spoke.

“Dr. Solo. You have finally _deigned_ to join us,” he said, cruel condescension in his tone.

Rey immediately cringed inwardly, realizing this was the person who had pounded Ben with claims and summons and he was so much worse than she had imagined.

“I’ve asked your fellow attendings to be present at this meeting, as you can see,” he informed Ben, gesturing to the men in red flanking him.

“Yes, sir,” Ben said beside her. “We’ve just driven in from Miami where my father is in cardiac step-down. He is recovering from an M.I. he suffered yesterday, and we were with him,” he informs them.

Rey hates that he even has to share this information with these men.

It feels too pricey an experience to have just lived through to have these men sneer at it so clinically, clearly unmoved by the implied importance of their ordeal.

“Yes, you said that over your text,” Snoke dismisses it.

_Ok, I was being too charitable. I hate him,_ Rey thinks.
“Let me ask you this, Dr. Solo, why were you in Miami in the first place? I thought I made myself perfectly clear you were to be in a policy committee meeting in Washington with my team yesterday,” he asks.

Ben shifts on his feet. “I didn’t realize that trip was mandatory.”

“Ah. I see. So, you went to Miami to have a family getaway with your mother, the good Dr. Organa, and daddy had a heart attack while you were there. And I’m supposed to believe you weren’t just having a romantic getaway with your little girlfriend? I find this not only difficult to believe but, wholly unacceptable, even if it is true. Do you mean to tell me you chose to prioritize a little fuck-fest more highly than a legislative roundtable in the nation’s capital with the Chairman of the Department of Health and Human Services and the fucking senators representing our interests in D.C.? A meeting designed to impact the broad spectrum of healthcare delivery in the surgical setting? Please tell me, Dr. Solo, are those the actions of a highly-trained and invaluable member of a surgical team, or the actions of an insolent, irresponsible, horny teenager?” Snoke sneers.

There is no way for Ben to answer this, so he swallows while Snoke continues.

“I’ll admit, my boy, she’s very pretty but, surely you could find something comparable closer to work, and save yourself the hassle of being called in here for disciplinary action,” Snoke says, bored, surveying Rey head to toe.

The implications of Snoke’s words hit Rey.

He’s calling her a cheap piece of ass, disposable, interchangeable.

She’s not sure which insult is the worst.

Alligator, she thinks. That’s what he reminds me of. An Alligator Alley-dwelling, beady-eyed reptile.

“Excuse me,” Rey speaks up, taking a slight step forward. “I don’t know how much about how medicine works but, that was unfair and uncalled for and I don’t appreciate it.”

She’s an adult human woman, a Navy vet, a college grad, she’s Maz-fucking-Kanata’s daughter, and you do not fucking come for her unless you’re called for.

Snoke doesn’t have the decency to stifle a chuckle, he snorts at her in amusement openly.

“Aw, did that truth hurt your feelings?” he asks.

“You do not know me, you do not know Ben Solo, and you do not get to say these things,” Rey perhaps doesn’t know much but, this much is evident so she says it resolutely.

“Oh my dear, I don’t have to know you,” he says, spinning his chair away from the table before
rising to approach Ben and Rey.

_He even moves like a gator_, Rey thinks, watching him stalk towards them, his tan scrubs giving him the illusion of an unhealthy pallor.

“I have been a surgeon since before your parents were born. I have been a surgeon and faculty member for nearly four decades at three separate university medical centers. The number of surgeons I have personally groomed and raised would be higher than you could guess and I have no doubt Dr. Solo here, singular in several notable ways, suffers the same stressors as the hundreds of surgical residents I have trained before him, and I have even less doubt he relieves himself of said stress with any number of available partners, _none_ of which I would expect _you_ to know anything about.”

He has cut her as effectively as he could have were she anesthetized in a surgical suite in this very building.

He has knocked the wind out of her, suggesting Ben is cheating, could cheat.

She’s stunned into silence.

It pisses her off to have lost this round but, she’s legitimately speechless. She takes a moment to breathe hard through the nose and looks up at Ben beside her.

“Dr. Snoke, I regret to inform you, I resign from the surgical residency. Effective immediately,” Ben says, turning to face his boss.

He reaches into his white coat pocket, pulls out his identification badge and places it firmly on the conference room table.

It is Snoke’s turn to look astonished now, and Rey relishes it, but, it only lasts a second as his hateful, black eyes narrow and he creeps further towards Ben.

“You quit,” he gives a wheezed chuckle, “You. Well, that’s fine, Dr. Solo, that’s fine. I assure you, your position will be filled by the time your worthless husk leaves the grounds of this hospital with a candidate frothing at the mouth to replace you. And when you contact me in the future? Begging for your job back? It will no longer exist as an available option for you when you’ve found you are incapable of finding a single surgical residency anywhere in this country to accept you because _no one_ will hire you without a positive word from me and I assure you, I will offer nothing of the kind. On the contrary, you will have no career in medicine. Mark my words, Solo, this is the final day of your life as a physician. I hope it has all been very worth it to you, Dr. Solo,” he sneers, pointedly motioning to Rey.

“You have proven a waste of my time, my talent, and my breath. Get out.”
The room is frozen in the immensity of loathing Snoke emanates and Rey struggles to climb out from the smoldering ruin of threats he’s bombarded Ben with.

Ben though, shaking slightly and wider-eyed than when he entered the room, pulls his shoulders back and cuts his eyes slightly as he lifts his chin visibly.

“I will,” Ben says, taking Rey’s hand, his eyes flaming, his voice lethal and measured, “just as every resident before me, surpassing you and free.”

Ben leads them to the door of the conference room surely.

They both walk as if in a trance out the door, down the white halls, towards the garage where Ben’s car is parked on the 3rd floor.

In the dark, open-air parking garage, the hot breeze off the Gulf floating past them, waking them from their stupor after the barrage of condensed insults, Ben angrily tears away his white coat and throws it on the ground next to his car.

He marches around, head in his hands for a moment, then stops abruptly.

He walks over to the grey concrete piling and laces his hands behind his lower back against the wall, leans his head back to the concrete and looks up at the low ceiling, breathing hard. The parking garage vibrates with cars passing overhead, beneath and around them.

Rey waits a beat and then walks to Ben’s white coat, picks it up, brushes it off, folds it reverently over her arm.

She’s not afraid of him, she’s just giving him a minute to breathe.

She walks closer to him, looks up into his wounded, ruined eyes as he lowers his gaze to look at her, fire died out and replaced with defeat.

She holds out her hand to him until he takes it, brokenly.

She laces their fingers together and tells him tenderly as she leads him to the car,

“Let’s go home. I’ll drive.”

******

Chapter End Notes
thank you to my friend and beta, uselessenglishmajor
<3

Comments and kudos get you to heaven.

Xo
- Strawberry
Last chapter before the Epilogue, coming Tuesday, y'all.

My heart is light and thrilled and also heavy and sad. This is the first work of fiction I have ever written and I am still amazed by your tremendous support and so thankful for the love.

What an incredible privilege to write for you, to honor a picture of soulmates, to celebrate something uniquely Reylo and to pay homage to the love of my life, my own personal Ben Solo in real life, my darling husband, my man.

Come see me on tumblr or come read "The North Shore" and come back Tuesday to wrap up here.

<3
light and joy
- Cupcake
It feels wise and best to sit motionlessly beside her while Rey drives his car back home to Long Beach Key, once they’ve left Ft. Wells.

Ben is definitely not in the headspace to be driving a 5-speed Audi right now, not with this much
extreme tension twisted into his back, this many ancient, menacing demons sitting on his shoulders, whispering to him about his worthlessness and failure.

He looks out the window, his seat reclined deeply, and thinks for a minute how nice it is to be traveling this stretch of highway while the sun is still lowering itself into the Gulf, instead of past midnight or nearly daybreak as is his normal routine.

The drive is mostly straight highway, nothing but pine trees and scrub brush to hold his gaze, and he lets his eyes skip along aimlessly as he brings his heart rate back down, his blood pressure dropping, his respirations calming.

“You okay, baby?” he hears Rey ask.

She’s asking him too big a question though, too loaded, and he’s too unworthy of answering her to do more than nod and give her a tight-lipped, false smile. He hasn’t fooled her with his response but, she leaves it alone and focuses on traffic patterns as she navigates.

It’s too painful to look directly at her for long, anyhow.

All Ben can think about are Snoke’s words, repeating on a loop in his head, over and over. His disdain, his condemnation, his dismissal so complete it fills Ben’s brain and leaves no space for anything else to filter through to dilute the vitriol.

The longer he sits in it, the caustic messages eat away at Ben’s confidence, his plans for his future, his work record, and the less he knows to be solidly true.

*What will he do now?*

*Who is he now?*

*How can Rey love him?*

*How can she want him, after this?*

*What could he offer her?*

He thinks about her courage in the conference room, the fierce way she guarded him, defended herself and stood up to Snoke in a way Ben himself hadn’t, even in the moment of the worst humiliation of his life and he is both awed at her bravery and overpowered by a swell of love for her.

She had done all that, never wavering, never shrinking, and it had come directly on the heels of the way she’d taken care of him, taken care of his whole family the last two days.
Here he was, amazed at his admiration and passion for this woman, and he was at the lowest point of his life - as a man, as a son, as a physician, as a human failure.

Dumpster fire, he thought.

He was lost in pain for their two-hour drive home, useless to drive, powerless to talk and hopeless for his future.

He was surprised, then, when Rey parked the car, not in front of the guard gate at the estate, where he thought they’d be when he focused his eyes but, on a familiar restaurant at the far end of Long Beach Key.

He had come here so many times in his life, the establishment being only one of four restaurants the key had to boast, his family referred to is merely as The Cafe. He looked at Rey as she pulled the emergency brake and opened her door and said to him, “C’mon, man” and made to climb out.

The energy required for Ben to unfold himself from the passenger seat is considerable but, Ben closes the door behind him, and accepts Rey’s hand as she pulls him into the cafe.

“Any tables facing the water?” she asks the hostess, and they follow the young woman to a table and chairs under the awning, through the glass double doors, onto the back porch, facing the Gulf.

Ben sits and takes a menu but, he stares out at the limitless Gulf of Mexico.

The water out there looks so unaffected, so unaware of everything he’s lived through the last few days, all he can do is stare at the waves, envious.

“Alright, Ben Solo. Let’s have it,” Rey says to him.

He looks at her.

“You’ve been silent as the grave for two solid hours. Speak,” she insists.
“I…I don’t know what to say,” he finds, the truth of it hitting as he says it.
“Okay. Want me to talk?” she asks.
“Sure,” he shrugs.
Let’s have it, he thinks.

Go on, rip out my heart and stomp on my soul. I’m already crushed, this will just compound it. Tell me what a shitty job I did back there. Tell me you’re disappointed in me. Tell me how destructive I am, that in the span of three days I’ve nearly killed my father and destroyed my career. Tell me it’s over and you’re leaving me. You need more than I am.

He knows she will yell at him, or worse, speak low and laced with revulsion, look at him with disgust and he straightens.

He’s braced.

He knows how to do this.

He’s prepared.

What he is not prepared for, are the words that leave her mouth.

“Do you know what I was just thinking about, looking at the water just now?” she asks and continues when he remains still, not nodding or speaking, waiting.

“No? I was thinking about you. Remember when you came home from school a long time ago, and I was like 15 or 16? Remember we had a Christmas party at the house and you and I stayed upstairs that night and threw food at each other and I braided your hair and we watched that old Jimmy Stewart movie? I had on that stupid pink dress, and I loved how it reminded me of cotton candy and you said I looked like Glinda the Good Witch?” she is speaking and there isn’t any animosity in her words, so he just smiles a little and nods.

Of course, he remembers that. Where is she heading with this? he wonders.

She continues, “well, I don’t know if you remember but, that morning, before the party I brought you some coffee when you were sitting in a rocking chair on the back lanai at the estate and I was flirting up a storm with you. Oh my God, Ben, even then I thought you were the hottest thing I had ever seen and I wanted to kiss you so bad but, I’d never kissed a boy before and you were so cute and so broody and so out of my league and basically in a hurry to get away from me as fast as you possibly could because I don’t think you saw me as anything but a little kid at that point. Anyway, you went inside the house and I sat out there on the lanai and I cried - I actually cried over you - because try as I might, I could not seem to get you to notice me. And then you know what I did?”

He doesn’t answer because he’s in shock and he’s comparing and overlaying their separate experiences in his mind, contrasting their views and it’s taking up brain power.
“I walked down to the beach and I grabbed a shell and made a wish and threw it into the water, as far and as hard as I could, my little 15-year-old self. I told myself, ‘if that shell floats back to me, my wish will come true’. And it did. It floated right up to my toes. The same shell. Do you want to know what I wished?”

He nods his head a little, transfixed by this story, in shock at where this conversation has headed, so different than what he’d expected, and he’s still waiting for the hammer to fall.

“I held my little shell and said, ‘I wish Ben Solo would love me back’.”

Rey smiles at him and reaches for his hand across the table and laces her fingers with his and smiles at him and tells the server who appears at her elbow, “water and lemon, please” and looks at Ben, waiting for him to order a drink as if he could possibly do so.

As if he can speak right now, as if words and language and drink orders are reasonable expectations in this moment.

“Uh, same-same,” he stutters, dismissing the server as quickly as possible, ordering a water.

“I remember that day vividly,” Ben tells her. “I remember I got the hell away from you as fast as I possibly could because I thought you were too cute for your own good and you were jail-bait.”

“Really?!” she squeaks.

She seems straightforwardly giddy with this revelation.

“Uh, hell yes,” he confesses, continuing, “actually, I think I may have gone upstairs and jacked off, honestly,” he tells her with a slight cringe, delighted to see her mouth gaping in startled joy at him.

“You did?!” she is enjoying this, he can tell.

“Sweetheart, yes, you had no idea how crazy you were driving me all the fucking time back then,” he realizes it feels so good to get this off his chest, to align them, to pull the threads of their lives closer and twist them around each other like ends of a twist-tie, all the way to when she was a teenager and he was being tortured by her, even if they were each unaware of their effect on one another at the time.
He’s so amazed where this conversation has gone, such a stark turn from where he thought it was headed.

Ben exhales noisily and tries to let his tension ease a little, still wondering if the hammer is about to drop but, Rey continues and he realizes there’s no curse coming, no roasting, no outrage and he’s stunned and elated.

“Unbelievable,” Rey murmurs, staring into his eyes, shaking her head back and forth. “I was so crazy into you and I had no idea.”

“Yeah, you were major trouble for me,” he admits, “I stayed far, far away for a long time after that, baby girl. Too far and for way too long. Looking back now, I don’t think I could’ve done it much longer,” he says, knowing it’s the truth.

She is just grinning at him, biting her bottom lip, looking at him like he’s a king or a god or an emperor, none of which he feels he deserves in the least.

Sobriety fills his head and he furrows his brow and takes her other hand in his, too across the table.

“You know what Snoke said back there, about random partners and stress relief,” he begins, shaking his head, seeing her do the same, mirroring him from across the table, “you have to know, Rey, baby girl, he is a sick old bastard who does not know what he’s talking about and he’s dead wrong. There is no girl for me but you.”

He’s holding her hands, squeezing them for emphasis with every pointed word.

It pains him to think someone like Snoke could poison their love for one another, attempt to cheapen it with his disgusting insinuations.

As if there could be any heart sweeter, any body more tantalizing to Ben than this woman’s, as if he could want anyone else.

She’s just looking into his eyes when she says, clear as a bell with a smile, “Baby, he doesn’t know what we have. How we have waited or for how long. He has no idea. No one does. Only us. I know that.”

It gives him courage to face reality.
“Rey, I have to be honest. I have no career as of this moment. I might be a lost cause. I may have just fucked up my entire life today, and I worry you’ll think I fucked up your entire life, too.”

She’s studying him. Does she know this is incredibly humbling for him? She has to know how much power she wields at this moment.

Does she? he wonders. She could eviscerate me, here and now.

“Do you love me, Ben Solo? Did my wish come true?” Rey asks him, hands held tightly in his.

“More than anything on earth, Rey. More than I can tell you.”

“Ben, do you know what you did today in that conference room? You fought for me. For us. You loved me. You loved me, an orphan, an invisible little girl, you stood up and refused to leave me, the housekeeper’s daughter, you refused to let him trash me, refused to take his offer and abandon me. You told me you loved me in that room today, that I’m worthy and you’re mine. Baby, our life just started today. Today you came home to me. He may have been your work but, Ben, I want to be your home. I got my wish granted. Ben Solo loves me back. The way I love him. You think anything else matters to me? You think I care, even for a minute about anything else? You’re mine. Remember? Like I’m yours? Mine. You’re my wish. The rest…we figure out. Together. Indivisible.”

She’s smiling. Her face is beaming at him, really, a living star illuminating his life, and the sun is setting and it’s glowing her pink and golden like an angel.

Mermaid angel woman, he thinks.

She’s prettier than a painting, she’s more loyal than family, she’s more intoxicating than champagne and Ben is beside himself with love for her.

“Come here,” he invites her, and she comes to sit on his knee, kisses him deeply, lets him taste her all the way he can, for as long as he dares, and she stays on his knee, her arm around his shoulders, her back to the restaurant while they watch the sunset.

When the last tip of the sun dips below the waves, the restaurant erupts in applause of Mother Nature, for her evening performance of the sunset but, Ben imagines every clap is for Rey, whose beauty to him outshines the whole sky.

******
Ben is downstairs by 6 am the next morning, both landline and cell phone in hand, paperwork spread out around him in the kitchen.


Her hair is in a messy bun, lopsided on her head, her sweet tits too beautiful and perky at eye level and he can’t resist mouthing a nipple through her tank and squeezing her ass. She moans and lets her head drop back and he nearly loses his train of thought. He pats her bottom and tells her “hey, baby girl, morning”, knowing he can’t lose his focus and get off-task right now and forces his attention back to his paperwork.

“What are you doing? I didn’t know where you went. I looked for you in bed and poof! Gone,” she’s heading to the coffee.

“Getting my shit together, baby girl, that’s what I’m doing. I gotta get a job,” he tells her.

Last night, after dinner, he had found some words to share after all - not many but, a few - and they walked on the beach for a while.

He was only able to do so because he allowed himself to believe she loved him the way he loved her, and it bolstered not only his tenacity to disassemble the cacophony of insults in his head about who he is and what he’s capable of, but, it woke him up this morning with a determination to create a plan of attack for himself.

Rey’s love for him and utter refusal to doubt him, inability to judge him for his accomplishments rather than on the most naked, stripped-down, least-fancy version of himself gave him the purest drive to achieve greatness and he’d shot like an arrow out of bed with ideas.

He was moving through life like he was alive again today, like he’d been pumped full of inspiration and purpose and hope, like Rey had taken his pulse and found it to be thready and breathed her own heart into his mouth, pushed her own fervor in his veins, placed her own hand over his heart and electrified it with her belief in him.

He was alive.
He woke at 5 without an alarm, ran three miles, showered outside near the pool and got busy.

He had what it took. He was getting his shit together.

*****

When Ben went upstairs after a fatiguing day on the phone making efforts to secure all the details he needed to finally cut himself free of the guilt of leaving his job, it was 3 pm and he bolted up the stairs, having had a very successful final phone call.

He opened the door to his room and locked it behind him and stripped his shirt over his head.

Rey was sitting on the bed, watching reality TV on her computer, drinking a Coke and lounging lazily.

Walking over, he snapped the computer closed as she looked up at him and he grinned as he pulled off his pants and said,

“get naked for me, please.”

The way he took her up against a wall was sweet and forceful and invasive and incredible.

He told her between groans he had a plan and it was all going to be ok and he loved her and she was his lighthouse, his shining star, his beautiful, sweet mermaid girl, he made her throw her head back and laugh and then stop mid-laugh to gasp with his depth, and he moved her up higher to hurt her the way she loved better and better and better.

“I’m going to give you the beach, baby girl. The beach and the stars and the moon and the sun, goddamn it,” he told her while he reached as far as he could.

“You already have, you already do, I only want you,” she gasped into his mouth, her hair tumbling around her, her body held aloft, dependent.

“Fuck, Rey, I love you so much,” he told her, spiraling together, in sync, a powerhouse of love and energy. “You are the love of my life, baby girl.”

“I know it,” she told him with her most wicked smile, “I cursed you when I made that wish, Ben Solo. It’s all my doing. I own you. I demanded you and the universe granted it,” she’s breathless and beautiful and Ben is held in her clutches, his mysterious, powerful, recklessly loving beauty.
When he tells her *come for me, sweetheart, do it, show me, let me watch*, she is helpless to deny him, and when she says *please, baby, please, please, Ben, let me feel you, give me what I need*, he satisfies himself into her, he does as she wishes obediently, doing her bidding just as she demands of him.

He leaves her where she is against the wall, his thighs trembling, his arms weak, his spirit a summit of strength salvaged, restored, and he kisses her into the sky, the clouds, the atmosphere, the stars, the galaxy, and back down again, as afternoon fades around them.

******

“Rey and I have talked a lot about this and we have come up with some plans for ourselves,” Ben takes a breath.

Everyone is looking at him expectedly but Rey just smiles at him when he looks at her for one last confirmation, squeezes his hand where it’s laced between hers and he lays out what they’ve decided for themselves.

Last night, Han and Leia had arrived home and the house was a hive of activity, a flurry of worries and conversations and concerns.

Han had nearly thrown every one of them out of the house with his annoyance at being fussed over. He had shouted at everyone so much to *give him some goddamn space for Christ sake* they had all scattered soon thereafter and hidden.

This morning has been spent getting the life of the estate back in running order after the weekend’s distressing events, and now everyone has assembled because Ben has asked them all here.

The entire family is sitting in the formal living room, spaced out on armchairs, couches and a dining room chair for Chewie he’d dragged it, scraping the legs on the tile floors as he went, giving him space all his own, as usual. Han is set up in his tan club chair beside the table lamp, looking like himself for the first time since before Miami. Maz and Leia are beside each other on one couch, Poe and Finn on another.

Rey and Ben are hip-to-hip, holding hands on the love seat adjacent, and Ben presses in, reminding himself he is *who* he’s supposed to be, right *where* he’s supposed to be.

He draws strength from his girl and he presses in.

“On the way home from Miami, Rey and I went to Ft. Wells and I quit my job.”

It’s a bombshell.
“You what ?!” Han, Leia, and Poe all exclaimed at roughly the same time. They’re more stunned than outraged but, the shockwave is nearly physical anyway, pushing Ben mentally off his feet for a second before he continues, making no excuses and asking no pardon.

“I quit my job. I hated it and I left it. Simple as that. Snoke has been hounding me for a while about my priorities, degrading my work ethic, suggesting I leave Rey and frankly, as much as I love cutting and being a physician, I fucking hated my life. So, I quit.”

“So, now what?” Poe asks, still being the only original family member with the wherewithal to speak words at that moment, Leia and Han still sputtering and wide-eyed.

“I talked with Uncle Luke yesterday. He and I had a long talk about it and, I am going to apply to the emergency medicine residency here at Seacoast. He’s willing to put in a good word for me, too, since that’s where he graduated residency from, and it seems like a natural fit for me. It’s only three years so, even if I have to start from scratch for residency and flush the last two years of surgery, I’ll still get finished way before my plastics residency would have ended. I’ll still do lots of procedures in emergency medicine, I’ll still get to do all the fun shit, I just won’t have to work for Snoke anymore and hate my life. And, I’ll be able to be here at home with Rey. I’m going to sell my condo, shouldn’t be that hard, lots of residents try to buy in that building and so, number two, Rey and I want to take you up on the offer of moving into the yellow cottage together, Mom and Dad. We don’t want to live in my room anymore and we won’t live apart so if you’re still offering, we accept. But, we are going to pay rent. A little rent. I am technically still a student after all,” he finishes with a smirk.

As he’s spoken, his parents’ faces have softened into fascination as opposed to astonishment.

His and Rey’s plan makes so much sense, he can feel it settle and seep into the grooves of their worries and hesitations.

“I don’t want to be away from Rey. I won’t be away from her anymore, period, paragraph. Six fucking years apart was long enough and I’m done with that. That’s over, us being apart. So, that’s first. And Dad, I know you’re going to have a fit about this but, I want to be here as you recover. And no, I don’t think you’re an invalid. I know you’re still as much a crotchety hard-ass as ever, I just think it’s not the worst thing in the world for me to be here to help around the estate if you need me. And since Rey, of course, just came home a few months ago I’d never ask her to leave Maz, and anyway, her job starts next week at the marina and I know she’s ready to get out on the water again so this just what makes sense for us,” he’s done now.

He takes a breath and looks around the room, reading faces.

Ben has talked for so long and covered so much ground they’re all just sitting quietly, processing.
Rey pipes up, finally. “So…what do you think?” she asks no one in particular.

Leia finally clears her voice and breaks the silence.

“I think it’s the best thing I’ve ever heard. I…Ben, I’m just so proud of you…I don’t even know where to begin,” she says, tears shining in her eyes.

“Don’t believe a word of it,” Han interjects, “what she really means is, when can she redecorate upstairs and plan for a grandbaby?”

It breaks the tension in the room and Rey laughs out loud.

“Yeah, yeah, slow down, Grandma. One thing at a time. Let me have some time with my girl first. Damn,” Ben smiles at them all.

He moves his hand to the back of Rey’s neck while they smile at each other and exhale.

They hadn’t expected that to go badly, in fact, it had gone pretty much exactly as they had expected but, it felt like a huge discharge of stress to expel it all after spending two days planning.

“So, Finn,” Leia looks from Ben and Rey to him on the couch near Poe, “where does this leave you?”

Rey interrupts. “Finn, you’re my best friend and the yellow cottage is a two-bedroom and of course you are free to do whatever you want but, Ben and I would be more than happy to live with you there if you want to move out of the upstairs. You have roommate dibs, after all.”

“Uh, thanks Peanut…” Finn has no response to this. He’s looking around like he’s what, confused? Conflicted?

Finn looks at Poe.

“They’re your family,” he says to Poe.

Everyone looks from Finn to Poe and back again at least once.
Most people in the room are on their second or third pass after a moment of silence, looking from one of them to the other and back again, waiting to understand what they are looking at each other for, what they are talking in code about.


She is done waiting for the natural conclusion to this standoff and wants clarity.

This has been a bananas weekend and she feels like the world won’t stop throwing her curveballs.

Poe clears his throat and moves forward to the edge of the couch, hands clasped together, elbows on his knees.

Everyone turns their attention to him.

It’s quiet with expectation all around them. It’s his turn in the hot seat, apparently, and Ben is relieved his and Rey’s turn has concluded, even if it means he wasn’t expecting this and feels as thrown as his mother looks.

“Well,” Poe begins, initially somber and deciding in that split second to put a whimsical spin on this, which is not only easier for him it’s also more comfortable for his family.

“Well,” he repeats, “Finn isn’t going to live in the big house anymore or in the yellow cottage because he’s going to live with me.”

“That’s it? That’s all? Well, that makes everything easier for your brother and Rey, why didn’t you spit it out for God’s sake? What’s the big deal, so you’re just getting a 2-bedroom pad in Laketown now? Is that right? Is that the plan, you need a bigger place now?” Leia asks.

All eyes land on Poe again.

“Uh, no, Mom. Because. Because here’s the thing,” he says, palming the back of his neck and grimacing a little with the effort, “we only need one bedroom. Me and Finn. Together.”

Again, all eyes shift from Poe to Finn and back again.

Leia’s face doesn’t change one iota.

Rey’s face spreads into a huge smile slowly, her cheeks turning bright red.

Ben needs a minute, needs to replay and recount every single day of his life quickly, sorting through all his memories of his brother to figure out how the hell he could have missed something like this.
He is at a total loss. He wonders for a moment if he knows his brother at all or if Poe is a perfect stranger to him.

Then, he thinks about how much he loves his brother, how much he likes Finn, how he wants Poe as fulfilled in his life as he is with his Rey and he smirks and leans back all the way in his seat, enjoying every ounce of this, an arm wrapped around Rey.

*This will be good,* Ben thinks with a smirk.

Han gives a lengthy sigh.

Maz is studying Leia, her priority being to see where Leia is heading, to compensate for her if need be.

Chewie looks like he could take a nap, his arms folded over his chest, his eyes at half-mast, leaned back in his straight-backed chair.

Poe keeps talking.

“Now I know, I know this is a surprise. And trust me, I didn’t ever think I would ever have to sit here and have this huge confession in front of my whole family like this like I’m having a goddamn intervention or something. *Jesus.* I thought I could just bang some dudes and get it out of my system and go about my business and be fine, work hard, marry a great girl like Jess, have a wife like Ben’s going to, have a life that looks like yours and Dad’s, Mom, but, ya know, I realize I’d rather go for broke and be happy instead of faking it and god *damn* it, it feels amazing,” he takes a breath.

“I know it’s a lot. And I know me and Finn have only known each other a few months and you guys are just learning about all of this right here this very moment and all but, listen, you gotta understand guys, this has been something I have known about and held onto inside me alone for a long time now. A *long* time. And me and Finn are a big deal for me. A very big, *big* deal. So, I’ve asked him to move in with me. To be my boyfriend. And, he said yes. And he actually applied for a job out in Laketown at the medical center and interviewed a couple weekends ago when he was out to stay with me and he got the job and it’s a done deal. So…,” he puffs out his cheeks with a huge exhale as he finishes, “that’s the deal. We’re together.”

While he’s been talking, no one else has spoken.

Finn is looking at the ground and then back at Poe as he’s talking, over and over, and his Adam’s apple is bobbing visibly as he gulps over and over. Once Poe’s done, no one is sure how to move forward, who talks first.

Han stands slowly.

Leia jerks towards him to help but he shoos her away with his hand. Everyone watches, no clue what’s coming next.
He walks slowly and steadily to the liquor cabinet in the built-ins. He pulls open the cabinet door and pulls out a bottle of Maker’s Mark and two tumblers.

“Han…” Leia warns, “you cannot drink that. You put that down right now, Han, for God’s sake, do not start with me, you just had a heart attack four days ago!”

He doesn’t even look her way, he just methodically keeps pouring two fingers of scotch in each tumbler.

When he’s capped the decanter, Han picks up the two glasses, walks over to the couch Poe sits on, hands him one, clinks his glass carefully to Poe’s and knocks it back. A slow smile spreads across Poe’s face as he watches his father’s actions.

Han still hasn’t said a word.

Leia jumps up and stands with hands on hips, angry, “Han Solo, you crazy, old, infuriating jackass, are you trying to kill yourself?! Is that what you’re trying to do?! Are you trying to kill me ?!”

Everyone else is smiling, quietly, realizing what has just happened.

Poe came out of the closet and told them he and Finn are dating and his father, who had never known either fact before, just shared a drink with him. The gravity of the whole thing is settling on everyone and happiness is filling the room but, Leia is still steaming mad at Han.

She is not done.

Han looks her in the eye from across the room and begins walking back to the liquor cabinet. He is not done, either.

“Han Solo, don’t you dare. Don’t you dare! Are you suicidal? Is that what this is? Are you kidding me right now with this?! Are you trying to have another damn heart attack?!”

Leia is losing her shit. She is not equipped for this level of defiance.

Ben would be scared for his father right now if he hadn’t seen his mother become a puddle of tears four days earlier thinking she’d lost him. Leia looks like she’d like to murder Han herself right now but, Ben’s not fooled.
Neither is Han. He opens the cabinet again, opens a cigar box and pulls out three new Cuban cigars and a lighter.

_Wonder when he had time to get those_, Ben thinks, amused. He’s impressed.

Han walks over to the couch where Poe sits again, looking at Leia while she continues raving at him, screaming at him to stop it, sit down you idiot, stop being such a dumb, old, stubborn asshole, and he looks his wife right square in the eye.

He hands Poe a cigar and says “here you go, son” and hands the second to Finn and says “here you go, _Big Deal_” and putting the third between his teeth he lights it, looks at Leia directly and puffs till he has it lit and inhales a long drag of smoke and blows out a perfect ring of smoke.

Leia gives a frustrated scream.

It’s very hard for Ben not to laugh out loud and he decides to just go ahead and do it.

Han lights Poe’s and Finn’s cigars and Leia throws up her hands and gives an outraged cry, and starts marching around yelling, giving orders, manhandling the men smoking Cuban cigars in her fancy formal living room.

“Allright, alright, everybody smoking one of those disgusting things, get out right now, you think you’re so cute Han Solo, I swear to God,” she’s shooing them out the back lanai, waving away smoke as they walk, complaining with every step about the smell.

Han puts a hand each on Poe’s and Finn’s shoulders, whispers, “ignore her” and Finn gives an audible sigh of relief and slumps his shoulders. Poe laughs out loud and Ben smirks at Rey thinking that was awesome.

Leia follows them all to the lanai French doors and pulls Finn backward by his shoulder a little till he loses his balance, surprising him.

She kisses his cheek and says, “you sweet boy, I couldn’t have chosen better for him if he’d ever said yes and given me the chance to find him someone. I am so happy for you both.” It’s actually a generous compliment and he knows it and Finn beams.

Leia walks out to the lanai and Ben and Rey can hear her from the living room lecturing Poe about why hadn’t he told her and of course she’s happy and how long has he known and what else hasn’t he told them and is he sure they don’t need a bigger place because maybe they want to start a family one day and if Finn is already moving in now they could just go ahead and both move together into a bigger place and get it over with in one fell swoop that way.
They hear Chewie ask, “what’s for dinner?”

Maz looks at Ben and Rey across the room and comes to stand before them, facing them. She takes each of their hands and just smiles at them.

She doesn’t even have words, really, not in Spanish or English but, she needed to just look at them up close to be sure for herself, just once, that this is right and good.

She decides it is.

“Mija, I want you always to be happy,” she tells her daughter.

“Mama, I know,” Rey tells her.

“Maz, we won’t leave you,” Ben says, looking at Maz intently.

“Ben Solo, I’ve known you all your life. I know who you are and where you come from. You don’t have to sell me on it, Mijo. You live long enough, you see the same eyes in different people. I see you and I know you’ll be good to my daughter and that’s all I want,” and she pats both their hands and heads for the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea and turn some music on while she makes dinner for everyone.

She’s planning steaks and corn on the cob, and she’ll call for Chewie to light the grill in a few minutes and help her.

“I’ll make you a pan of brownies,” she shouts to them as she walks away, not turning around. Ben knows she means it for him.

His heart is so warm and bubbly he feels like he’s melting from the inside out.

Rey looks at him. “Baby, let’s go get in bed and snuggle and hide till dinner.”

Ben stands and stretches a little.

“When you say ‘snuggle’,,” he begins, using air quotes with his fingers, “do you mean sleep? Or have sex? Because I know what my vote is, sweetheart,” he tells her with a sly grin.
Rey smirks and rolls her eyes and begins walking towards the stairs.

“…I mean, that was stressful. I was stressed. In fact, I am still feeling very stressed, and I’m just saying, I know exactly how you could make me feel less stressed.”

They’re climbing the stairs, hands linked like always.

“…in fact, the whole last week, actually has been very, very stressful,” he’s never sounded more pleased with himself and he’s amusing them both.

They top the staircase and round the stairwell bannister, giving Ben a fleeting flashback of himself in a tuxedo, age 18, right over there where he had frozen and watched Rey stand just right here, where he is now, crying and turning away from him, the noise of the party beneath them, the ghost of his brother in the library downstairs, Rey’s eyes filling and spilling with tears he wasn’t worthy to catch.

All the relief, all the amazement, all the yearning, all the angst and tenderness and misery and joy of the last 10 and a half years washes over him and he is overwhelmed.

He is flooded with gratitude and he almost falls apart.

He tugs Rey’s hand softly, right there on the second story landing and slows to a stop, and pulls his girl close, his attitude instantly shifting from flirtatious to fervent and he tells her,

“Baby girl. You know you are mine. Right? Forever? You know I love you down to my soul.”

Rey reaches up, threads her fingers into his hair, smiles at him mischievously, reaches up and kisses the fire out of his luscious mouth, turns to race him back to his bedroom where she will strip and make love to him twice before dinner, once in bed and once in his shower because that sounds fun and they haven’t done that yet and plus she doesn’t want to go downstairs to have dinner with their whole family smelling like sex even if Ben wants her to because she’s his and he’s proud and she tells him,

“I know.”

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Indestructible

Chapter Summary

an overwhelmed and humble thanks to all who have read The Housekeeper's Daughter.

This was my first ever work of fiction and I am incredibly honored to have had the privilege to share it with you all <3

Dedicated to the love of my life, an homage to my husband, my own Ben Solo.

Please come join us on "The North Shore"/"True North" journey here on AO3 <3

THANK YOU with ALL my heart!

joy and light,

- cupcake
Chapter 11

Indestructible

*FIVE YEARS LATER*
“Your mother would have loved this,” Leia tells her, with a sigh and of course she is so right. Maz would have loved this.

She would have busied herself helping plan, clean, prepare and staff it, never able to resist running the estate efficiently, even when she had been virtually adopted into the Solo family years ago but, yes, Rey thinks as tears fill her eyes without spilling, her mother _would_ have loved this.

It’s been nearly a year since her mother passed and Rey wonders if it will ever stop aching.

She is jolted out of her sorrow for Maz as Han steps to the center of the room, near the front, the band dying down to give him space to be heard. Into the mic he first grunts as he clears his throat and then, with a playful smirk he greets the crowd.

“I just wanted to toast my boys here,” he says, holding up a champagne flute. “Ya know, normally when you have _daughters_ you pay for weddings but, somehow my boys both got me to shell out for each of theirs because they’ve both always been a couple of little fuckers.”

There are chuckles all around them at this.

“I just wanted to tell my boy here, my Poe, I love ya, I’m happy for you, I’m one goddamn proud father, and for God’s sake, would you two keep it down upstairs,” more chuckles as people guess what he means and then go quiet as he continues.

“Years ago, me and Leia lost two babies. One was a girl and one was a boy. And I'll tell ya, it hurt like hell for a long time. Really, really hurt. It was awful. Sometimes life is one cruel son of a bitch. And truth be told, I didn’t do such a great job of handling it,” he pauses with a thoughtful sigh.

“But, you know, life goes on, you raise a couple kids, ya get old, and sometimes you get surprises. Well, I got surprised, anyway. I got the goddamn surprise of my _life_ because my Ben married his Rey here,” he raises his glass to Ben beside Rey, his arm looped around her shoulders, “and me and Leia got our daughter, and now my Poe has married his Finn and we get our other son. The universe gave us four kids after all.”

There is not a dry eye, you can hear sniffles throughout the crowd.

“Raise your glasses with me please, to my sons, to Poe and Finn, may you have a long and rich life together. And for God’s sake, get me a pair of goddamn earplugs.”
Laughter and clinking fill the air, and Rey smiles as she watches the grooms kiss. She has never seen either Finn or Poe more jubilant.

The band winds back up and the music fills the tent, Han receding into the room again. Rey sees Han scoop her daughter from Ben’s arms and reclaim her. Han is most comfortable again, his granddaughter in his arms, his favorite employment to carry her around and he sways to the music watching her tiny face in his arms, her fancy dress swinging around her as she giggles, held on her grandfather’s hip.

Leia pats Rey’s arm sweetly and goes to greet wedding guests, Ben kisses her temple and heads for the bar and his brothers, and Rey has a minute to herself to breathe.

She looks around the gorgeous outdoor wedding venue Leia has designed, the massive white tent dripping with gardenias, roses and lilies, and the oversized crystal chandelier hanging from the center of the tent, linen-draped tables and tuxes, and heels, and it’s truly a masterpiece.

She thinks back, remembering how downhearted Leia had been when Ben and a five-months-pregnant Rey informed her they were getting married on a beach in the Dominican Republic and requested Han take them all on the Falcon, just keep it simple, and she smiles to herself, grateful she’s been there to see Leia experience this wedding at the estate.

Rey loved her own wedding though, and wouldn’t have changed it for the world.

She loved the tranquility of that beach at sunset, the endless Caribbean waves winking at them, keeping its promise to watch over them.

She loved being surrounded by her safe, enduring circle of her people, Maz and Finn, Poe, Leia and Han, Chewie and Rose.

She loved the solid compact of joy that surrounded them, and how she concentrated on each of their faces as she walked, accompanied only by his child in her belly, towards her Ben.

She loved her man - oh, God, she loved that man, and she held her head high, knowing he was her destiny.

Rey had wished into the waves when she was 15 and the waves granted it and had given him to her, Ben standing near the water’s edge, waiting for her.

She’d been so satisfied, so at ease in her silk slip of a dress, the curve proudly hugging her swollen belly, barefoot, a red hibiscus flower behind her left ear, symbolizing her constancy to Ben. She
could have eaten Ben up, he’d looked so luscious standing so broad and smug, watching her swear herself to him, his chocolate eyes molten with love, sleeves pushed to his elbows, chest strong and voice liquid depths as he vowed himself to her.

She giggles to herself, recalling his filthy words over daiquiris, her own drink a virgin since their unborn baby was in on the celebrating, and as they’d danced dirty on the beach that night to merengue music, how he’d told her he loved her with everything he had, everything he was, how he’d threatened to try an put another baby in her, how he’d told her she was his fucking mermaid goddess and made her laugh, how he’d scooped her up and carried her, pregnant belly and all right off the dance floor and announced:

“go home, do not call us, I’m taking my wife and leaving and we love you and goodbye, ”

to all their family, unceremoniously ending their wedding celebration and beginning their honeymoon, leaving everyone else to dance and drink the next two days on their own.

She thinks back to the days of their honeymoon that followed, lounging together in the oversized bathtub in their private cabana, the breeze blowing the white sheers through the window, the crystal blue Caribbean water waving to her through the open windows as she slid down onto her husband, water sloshing messily onto the tiled floor, one with the ocean beyond the beach outside and around her body, her man beaming up at her, crooning,

“God, I love you, Mrs. Solo. I fucking love you so much, your body was made for me,” proud he had given her a child.

She remembers how he woke her in the dark, desperate and delirious, no idea what time it was, grumbling with a sleepy voice, “fuck, baby girl, you drive my crazy” before he took her roughly on her knees, tearing her laciest panties in half, her back pulled flush against his chest, his hands skimming her skin hungrily, and how he came before she did, unable to find control to wait for her, how it made him wild when he watched her come on her fingers afterward, covered in him, and he’d had to take her all over again.

She smiled thinking about how they’d driven all around the island, drunk on calling one another “husband” and “wife” and lost count of the ways and places they christened their hotel suite and one another’s bodies for a week.

She looks at Ben now, across the dance floor, he’s handing a shot to each of his brothers and Rey realizes she has no idea which number they are on when she sees them slam them back.

He’s a mess, he’s flushed and happy and smiling without a hint of self-consciousness, secure in so many areas of his life now, he can fully embrace his brother in a profound way.
He’d finished emergency medicine residency two years prior at Seacoast, which was a good thing since Snoke had been the focus of a massive lawsuit which ultimately caused a scandal and dismantling of his legacy, having been found to have been involved with a slew of corrupt politicians having embezzled a couple million dollars over the years.

Ben had proven damn good at his job as an emergency medicine physician at Seacoast but, what he’d really been engrossed in the last few years was building the second story on the yellow cottage, setting the structure just so, making sure he and Rey could see the Gulf waves from their bed through the window.

And, he was the *sweetest* daddy.

Rey had little to compare him to, just Han’s methods and model but, Ben was as gentle and devoted a dad as Rey had imagined herself loving as a child.

It was almost ridiculous, the embarrassment of riches Rey had been given.

When Marisol had been born two years ago, a pink, wide-eyed bundle of alertness and softness, Rey had waited and waited for someone to wake her from her dream, sure it must be too good to be true.

She’d told Maz over and over, “I don’t know what I’m doing, I’m doing it all wrong, I’m ruining everything, I’m ruining her, I can’t do it, I can’t do it right, take her, Mama, I think you should take her,” and cried for six solid weeks as she’d sat, trying to nurse her while she inexplicably wept, until Maz and Leia convinced her it was postpartum depression and she’d sought good, happy drugs and sleep and help and the understanding helped her crawl out from underneath.

She’d had an entire year with both her mother and her daughter together, her child, named “Mar” for the sea and “Sol” the sun, in Spanish for Maz’s homeland of Mexico, for their adopted beach castle home, and she’d never been so thankful to have had that concentrated time together when Maz had passed.

She chose to believe Marisol carried Maz around under her skin, inside her soul, and was a piece of her wherever she went, and it gave Rey tremendous comfort.

It was like maybe in some small way, her mother was even here now, today, at this wedding.

Rey saw Ben tip back another shot and thought, *oh, boy,* and headed towards the boisterously happy set of grooms and her husband beside them.

Crossing the dance floor, she caught Ben’s eye and he stepped towards her, swinging her loosely around in his arms, kissing her lips, hot and happy, and danced with her to Marvin Gaye.
She smiled up into his eyes and said “how are you tonight, Dr. Solo?” and he told her, “better now, baby girl,” and kissed her again, harder.

The next round of shots, she has two and Ben picks her up off the ground and twirls her around a little and squeezes her ass and she makes a mental note to take him home soon.

Poe tapped Ben on the shoulder and said, “hey, little brother, lemme dance with my sister,” and then to Rey as he takes her in his embrace, “hey Mouse, you look incredible tonight, girl,” and he danced her silly through two songs, expertly directing her, carrying them professionally along till Rey was out of breath and overheated and laughing out loud at him, like always.

She looked at him now, salt and pepper hair above a superb tuxedo, his dimples deeper and arms thicker but so happily carefree he seemed almost like the boy she’d known decades earlier, when she’d thought him devastatingly cute and unattainable, and she lets herself be amused at how she didn’t know then her fondness for Poe would never cease, it would just warm to an eternal friendship.

For a long while when she was a little girl, she had worshipped Poe, idealizing him and idolizing everything about him.

It’s amusing now to remember but, she can recall graphically how enamored she was with him, how she’d wait up to see him and talk his ear off. She can so sharply remember, looking at him now, how intuitively she had sought out his friendship and appreciated it in her loneliness. She remembers sometime around 8th grade, she was heading to a school dance, dressed up and sad she had no boy to attend with, and he’d squeezed her cheek and told her to give it a few years.

Thinking he was hinting at a future romance, she’d thrown herself headlong into spending time with him, every chance she got, only to find that familiarity bred something new in their relationship: friendship.

She felt her heart turn from adoration to affinity and one day she realized he looked at her as a buddy, much the way she looked at him.

By the time he graduated from college, she was elated to meet his girlfriend, Talia, and they’d had a blast spending the summer doing girl things together, even without Poe.

When Ben came home a couple years later during a break from medical school, Rey’s heart had been vacant a long time, and almost instantly his face, his presence, his essence, his body lit a fuse in her soul that never, ever extinguished, not with exposure, not with intimacy, and certainly not with time.

“Happy?” she asks Finn, handsome and elegant in his tux, handing him a beer, and sipping one herself, parched from dancing.
“Peanut, yes. God, yes,” he tells her, a wave of expelled relief audible in his voice.

Rey knows he means it doubly, since it’s been no secret Poe had taken the lead helping Leia plan this event and Finn would have been content to have eloped but, she knows he’s just grateful to be married to Poe, over and done with, and so she just grins at him and takes his arm. They stand there, side-by-side, taking it all in.

She’s a wife and mother and her best friend is husband to her brother-in-law.

She shakes her head a little in disbelief and looks Finn in the eye.

“Who’d have guessed, huh? All those years ago, driving that Hyundai from San Diego to Long Beach Key, who would’ve thought we’d be here tonight, married to those two pretty brothers?” she asks him, smiling ear-to-ear, watching Ben and Poe do the Whip/Nae Nae with Leia on the dance floor, all of them laughing hysterically, far past tipsy.

“Seriously,” he says, understanding, cracking up watching the same scene.

Two hour later, the grooms having left in a torrent of rice and screams and one huge, impressively-lengthy kiss, Han hands her a very sleepy 2 year-old and says to Marisol, “here you go, princess,” and leaves her baby to curl up in Rey’s lap at the table, watching the party dance on around them as Marisol nods off.

Ben approaches and reaches for her hand.

“C’mon, sweetheart.”

He drapes his arms around Rey’s shoulder and leads his girls out of the tent, across the yard, behind the orange grove and towards the yellow cottage.

Rey can hear the music playing through the trees, sending a melody over the Gulf waters as she falls asleep, her baby in the crib downstairs, rocked to sleep by the familiar lullaby of the tide and she wraps her arms around her husband in the dark.

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They each have a little headache from drinking so much, no need to deny it, and the sounds of the equipment crew dismantling the wedding site is noisy enough to wake the dead, so Ben and Rey hurry to pack the remains of their suitcases in near-silence, moving thoroughly and efficiently through their home.

“Does she need a blanky?” Ben asks his wife, holding up a well-worn, pale pink blanket from Marisol’s crib.

“Gigi has one at her house,” she tells him, indicating Leia has an identical blanket to comfort her granddaughter, no need to bring it with them.

Leia has an entire nursery set up for Marisol in the big house, and Rey feels conscientious about it sometimes, all the privilege her daughter is growing up with.

Two nurseries? Really?

But, she thinks about her own babyhood, the black hole of loss and rejection. She greets that central pain she carries, greets and acknowledges it and releases it to the sky mentally, watches it float till it disappears, as she always does with her trauma story.

She’d had to wait for Maz to fill up her empty cup, to find her as a child and love her up, but, her daughter will never have that experience and Rey is thankful.

She sweeps her baby into her arms and kisses her puffy, warm baby cheek and looks into her chocolatey eyes so like her daddy’s and she breathes relief in deeply.

She senses her place in the legacy of mothers in this family, of Leia and Maz and herself and one day her Marisol, and is reminded of her cemented place in the lineage she and Ben have created.

It’s not perfect but, it’s hers. All hers.

Within a half hour, Ben and Rey head for the big house, Ben holding their daughter’s small hand in his enormous one, dwarfing her humorously beside him, and Rey pulls her daughter’s miniature rolling suitcase behind her.

They enter through the Dutch kitchen door just as they always have, and Rey instinctively feels her body anticipate her mother, sniff the air for her cooking, look around for her small body, listen for her Spanish-accented voice, and just as always she feels the familiar pinch in her heart as she remembers all over again it wasn’t her mother who started the coffee in the big, marble kitchen today.
There will always be a vacant space where Maz should be and it both saddens and comforts her daughter, especially in this room.

“Gigi! Papa!” Ben calls through the house, beckoning his parents, on behalf of Marisol.

Their granddaughter is the surest bait to get them to show up, after all, and Rey knows her husband is fighting a hangover and ready to get on the road.

“There’s my little girl!” Leia exclaims as she picks up Marisol up from the floor, putting her securely on her hip.

Rey knows that stance, it’s the one she uses when she wants Rey and Ben to leave as soon as possible and give her alone time with Marisol.

“Has she had breakfast yet, Mommy?” Leia directs to Rey, her eyes on the baby in her arms.

“No, not yet, Gigi, she’ll be ready to eat when you are,” Rey kisses her mother-in-law’s cheek.

“Well, let’s go find Papa and get him to take us in the golf cart to get donuts, ok, honeypie?” Leia asks Marisol and adds, “say bye-bye to Mommy and Daddy,” before leaning Marisol in her arms towards her parents for a kiss. She never puts her down.

“See you in a couple days, my beauty, be good girl for Gigi and Papa,” Rey kisses her daughter.

“Love you, chucklebutt,” Ben tells her, making her smile with his nickname for her.

As they head for the Dutch door, she hears Leia tell Marisol, “…and we’ll FaceTime Uncle Poe and Uncle Finn and see if they made their flight later, too.”

Anticipating just how amused the newlyweds would be getting contacted by their family makes Rey cringe and then smile, knowing how wide her family circle has spread and how protected her daughter will be in this house with her grandparents and Chewie stopping by to swing her far, far too high into the air while she travels with Ben.

On the front step of the big house, Rey takes her man’s hand and looks around her, always remembering climbing into his red BMW when she loads into a car in the circle drive in front of the
Ben is older, thicker, more accomplished in every way now and, every bit as dead gorgeous to her today, ruining her with one filthy wink, liquifying her to the floor in a melted mess with his hands and his mouth, lost and doomed to love him forever for well over a decade now.

She can’t wait till she’s loved him more than half her life, till she’s old and grey and Marisol has kids and till this estate, where Leia grew up and she herself grew up, and Marisol will grow up holds new faces, new stories, nameless and undiscovered today but, she has faith she will, knowing this family to be firm, inclusive, indestructible.

“I cannot wait to be alone with you. I am going to ravage you, baby girl. Prepare yourself,” her husband tells her, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head in mock intimidation. His hand caresses her shoulder, her arm, moving to her legs where he wedges his hand high between her thighs and winks at her.

“I certainly hope so, Ben Solo. I have high expectations,” she tells him, meeting him on level playing field, her nails scraping his scalp under his hair gently.

Ben turns the car onto the gravel lane heading for the iron gates and waves one hand in parting over his head to Hux as they pull through the exit.

The wind is hot in the blazing sky, the morning sun having burned off the dew already, the black pavement sparkling as their car glides down Long Beach Key highway.

The palm trees lining the road bend lazily, submitting to the Gulf breeze, the seagulls swooping to catch breakfast from the water, and Rey leans back against the headrest and watches the blue patches beyond the homes peek out as they sail by.

Ben’s hand is on her, and she gazes at his handsome profile, thinks about how much she loves him and about how excited she is to show him California.

This anniversary will be such a rare one, Ben off work from the hospital and Rey taking time off from the marina simultaneously, a cross-country trip taking them so far from Marisol but, she hasn’t been back to California since she and Finn drove away years ago and she wants to show Ben the Pacific.

She wants to hold his hand and walk across the rocky sand with him, so unlike their sugary, powder sand at home, thread her fingers through his and feel the brisk, California air, so different from Florida’s humidity. She wants to stand with him, and see the white-capped waves, different from their placid surf at home, think about the fact some of this water could have travelled all the way
around the world, could be the same drops as lap at the seawall of their estate back home on Long Beach Key, and it’s somehow found its way here to them thousands of miles away on a different beach.

She wants to imagine nothing could keep the Pacific from finding it’s way to becoming the Atlantic again, that nothing really separates them but the time to travel distance, and how she and Ben are like that, just the same as the water.

Nothing could have kept them apart, even when they were kept from one another, they’d always have found their way to each other.

She should be sad to leave Long Beach Key, she’s such a homebody, as the wheels of Ben’s car leave Long Beach Key highway and turn onto a wide four-lane interstate, leading them further from their family, the estate, and familiarity but really, Rey doesn’t mind.

She has Ben.

He is her home.

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Alternate Chapter 4 scene

Chapter Summary

Cleaning out google docs, I found an alternate Chapter 4 scene that brought me right back to the thrill of writing *The Housekeeper's Daughter*. My beta had decided it wasn't needed, and I agreed. Now, it makes me smile now to read the self-indulgent romance, head-hopping, odd pacing, tense inconsistencies, run-ons sentences, and pure devotion that captures what I love about the privilege of fic writing. I was a newborn writer when I wrote these words, but that's half the fun of it.
So, here's a little addition to THD, FWIW.
This isn't really a thing people do? Post a chapter after the epilogue? But, whatever.
Fuck it.
xo
Berry

Ben

Last time Ben drove home for a family dinner, arriving after the enchiladas had become packaged leftovers and the family had retired to the living room, he hadn't been prepared for Rey to be there.

Frankly, it was the shock of his life. He would have had no regrets except that the he very much wished he'd had a chance to gather his thoughts and change his damn clothes before laying eyes on her and vice versa.

Tonight, all he could think about as he sped slightly all the way home along the boring interstate lanes was his girl. Her lips and his hands getting a chance to be on her.

He saw very little of the road as he drove along, barely noticing the cars and trees he zoomed by. At one point, he had daydreamed so fully, he was taken aback at how it was possible to drive such a distance while so distracted. He'd taken time to change into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, scrubbed himself with deodorant and shoved his scrubs into his duffle bag mercilessly. He flew through the two-hour drive. He didn’t have to be back at the hospital till 10 the next day. Every second of the next fourteen hours would be used wisely.

The lights were illuminated in the house when he pulled into the circle drive. Ben bounded up the front steps to the door quickly, avoiding the back kitchen door. Dinner must be done by now. Hopefully, that meant he could sneak in the house quickly, avoid his family.

“Hey,” Finn said. They nearly collided in the foyer. Finn dropped his duffle bag at the entrance. “I didn’t know you were coming home tonight.” He was already dressed in scrubs, ready for a night shift as a nurse at the med center.

“Got the night free,” Ben said, uncomfortable to be explaining himself in his parents’ house after all. It was obvious he’d come home to spend time with Finn’s best friend and Ben shoved aside the feeling of accusation. “You heading in to a shift at the hospital?”

“I am. Gotta get going,” Finn told him, holding up his lunch box and a water bottle as evidence.
Ben felt a surge of goodwill mixed with what felt suspiciously like an attempt to offset guilt. “Here, just take my car. I’m in for the night.”

Finn looked at him in surprise. “Are you sure?” Ben’s Audi was not a car Finn was about to turn down driving, but he wasn’t sure what he’d done to be granted the privilege. He was used to driving Rey’s little go-cart of a Huyndai.

“Take it,” Ben said, handing him the keys. Anything he could do to win over Finn and trap himself inside the house for the night was a good idea.

Never wanted to be trapped in my parents’ house before, he mused.

“Hey, thanks, man,” Finn smiled at him. “Rey’s upstairs.”

“Awesome. Thanks. Have a good shift, man,” Ben knocked his shoulder with his fist, turning to take the stairs. He had only gotten three stairs up when he heard a voice behind him.

“Ben.”

He stifled a sigh and turned around.

“Hey, Dad,” he tried to muffle the exasperation.

“What are you doing here?”

He wasn’t in the mood. He had an agenda and it was being prolonged, and he wasn’t keen on the idea of sharing his intentions with his father. He considered lying, considered pretending, considered just ignoring the question completely and finally decided fuck it.

“Dad. My girl. She’s upstairs.”

Han waved him off aggressively. “Okay. Sorry, sorry. Go on.”

Ben turned to regain his speed and took the stairs two at a time before anyone else could slow him down. Reaching the top landing, he gave a sigh of relief.

Rey’s door was open and the room seemed empty. He turned towards the den. He could see her where she was on the couch from here. Legs pulled into a pretzel, hair loose over her shoulders. Tiny shorts, a long sleeve shirt pushed up over her elbows and tied into a knot at her middle. She was balancing an open book on one knee about fiberglass boat repair. The Real Housewives of Somewhere or Other played on the massive wide screen TV in front of her. She didn’t even hear him enter the room.

Ben would have stopped at the door and surveyed her for a while, considered the things he found the most captivating about her. Or dreamed up a way to surprise her, but he’d had two hours thinking about getting close to her while he drove. He was done waiting. He walked right over to the couch and plopped down next to her heavily. She jolted with the shock, surprise registering on her face as she squeaked at him. He decided to say nothing, and just grinned at her, wide and unapologetic.

“Oh my God!” she squealed at him. She threw her legs off the couch, palms splayed wide on the cushions beside her, and tossed her book onto the table in front of her.

“What are you doing here? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home?!” She was a ball of nerves all of a sudden, he noticed. He compensated by remaining extra calm.
“Did I scare you?” he asked. He brought an arm behind her head, brushing her hair back.

“No,” she shook her head, wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him towards her where she sat beside him on the couch. This was close, but not nearly close enough.

“Come here,” he said quietly, pulling her by the hips till she was straddling him.

Her thighs trapped his and her forearms draped behind his shoulders. Her bottom balanced on his thighs and her nose was an inch from his. Everything about her filled Ben’s senses, her bright eyes, her intoxicating scent, her body making him delirious with its proximity. He willed himself to remain calm, and take his time, unwilling to make this all about himself. He had waited so long to be in this room, with this girl - he needed to be sure he didn’t lose the privilege.

“Miss me?”

“A little,” she answered.

“Ouch.” He placed a hand over his heart and feigned hurt.

“Okay, more than a little. A touch more,” she conceded, tilting her head adorably and looking into his eyes.

“A touch more,” he repeated. He brushed her hair behind her shoulders with both hands, grazing her neck with his fingertips. Ben leaned closer to her throat and grazed his nose against it, then his let his lips brush the hollow there. He skimmed his lips up the pillar of her throat, feeling her tilt her head back as far as possible. He heard her groan deliciously, and felt it buzz against his lips, encouraging him.

“Ben? ” He heard his mother call up the stairs.

Are you fucking kidding me? He rolled his eyes hard and huffing. He looked Rey in the eye as she dropped her chin to look him in the eye, and widened his stare as if to silently complain.

“Ben, I see your bag down here. Are you upstairs?” Leia called, apparently insistent on interrupting.

“Yes! Heading out! Be back later!” he shouted, eyes locked on Rey the whole time. He was possibly shouting a tad too loudly, letting steam off more than strictly necessary but, he was trying to convey his unavailability, damn it.

Ben jumped up from the couch, gently pushing Rey to standing, and laced their hands together. He pulled their joined hands to his chest, holding it tight against his chest as he walked from the den and murmured, “come with me.” Rey sent him a crafty smile and clicked off the TV. He led them all the way downstairs, walking towards the stairs but, pulled up short to grab a throw blanket off the foot of Rey’s bed as they passed her room, then pulled her back out to the hallway and down the stairs.

He put a finger to his lips to encourage silence, as he walked through the house. Once they were in the clear, out the back doors and past the pool, he gave a hefty sigh of relief and put his arm around his girl. This was more like it. He could breathe.

Once they were out of earshot, Rey wrapped her both arms around Ben’s middle, lacing her fingers together. She looked up at him while they walked.

“Where we going?” she asked.
“To the beach. That ok?”

“Mmmm,” she answered. He drank in the small woman beside him. The dark, warm sky, the calm waves beyond the grass, the stars blinking at them, and the warmth of the lit house behind them, and breathed in as deeply as his lungs would allow.

When he finally felt sand beneath their shoes, he kicked off his Adidas, and left them where they fell, welcoming the cool, fine crunch of sugary sand beneath his feet, slowing as he sank with each step. He laid the blanket on the sand and sat down, happy Rey followed suit and curled up next to him on the ground.

He breathed in deeply one more time, letting the salt air fill his heart with hope and his veins fill with saltwater, his heart nearly bursting with affection for Rey, for this patch of sand, for this night.

Rey laid down on the blanket on her back and curled onto her side, looking at Ben. He laid down opposite her, facing her, completely separated, hands a few inches apart on the blanket. Ben saw the sea grass waving in the lukewarm breeze, the small sand dunes hiding them here on the beach from anyone at the house.

“Let me ask you this,” he started, feeling the need to define things definitively between them right now. “So, when you start at the marina in a couple weeks, think there will be any good looking guys you work with?”

He hated sounding self-conscious and nervous but, this had to be done and his pride be damned, he wanted this clear as crystal. Ben didn’t think himself particularly handsome, though he knew he’d had some girls interested over the years, and he knew he didn’t fit the conventional ideal of attraction but, he knew Rey would reciprocate and his ego desperately wanted to know how far widely he appealed to her.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she answered, “potentially.”

“What happens when one of these hypothetically good-looking bastards hits on you?” he asked.

“Well, I have plenty of experience handling myself with pushy douche bags, Ben, trust me. I have been to college, you know. And the Navy - God. Don’t even get me started on the Navy.”

“So, I shouldn’t worry,” he hedges.

“So, I shouldn’t worry,” he hedges.

“About what?” She’s not letting him get off easily. Okay. He’s been invited to be honest and he’s about to be. *Fuck it.*

About anybody else sweeping you off your feet, he thinks. About anyone else stealing your heart away. About losing my shot at being with you.

“About ‘this’,” he tells her. He motions between them. He’s nervous. His swag is depleted, his bravado cleaned out. This is the brittle moment of truth.

Rey crawls to him. She settles above him, hips and thighs tight around his groin. Her hands land on his shoulders and her hair falls like a curtain. Her face dark in the moonlight. Her body melted around him. She pushes one side of her hair behind an ear and leans down to his lips. Just before she lets her lips settle onto his, she murmurs to him.

“This is what I want.” And she kisses him. Her mouth slips over his, the gift of her self delivered
wholly, her body encompassing him as her taste fills up his senses.

She tells him between kisses, pulling his lips into her mouth, proving it, showing him, “you’re what I’ve wanted for so long, Ben.”

That’s the magic word he’s waited for, the open door, the beckoning call, and he needs no further license to roll her onto her back and kiss her for all he’s worth. He sweeps her mouth into his and plus her hair into his hands and moans thankfully, unabashedly into her lips and moves his knee between her thighs, settling himself over her carefully. He worships her mouth with the praise he’s reserved only for her and thanks God and the stars and this night for giving him this perfect girl to be his.

“I swear to God, I’ve never had anything before like this,” he tells her, giving his eyes permission to yield all his secrets to her, restraining no part of what his heart hums to him, “there’s no girl for me but you, Rey.”

If he were sane he would stop himself.

If he were lucid he would be moderate.

If he were in control he would rebuke himself, maintain composure, remain aloof, retain control but, the flavor of her mouth and the feel of her body was created for him so perfectly, so ideally, he can’t imagine anything but consuming her. If that means he’s a goddamn fool allowed even another moment of drinking her in, crushing his adoration into her frame, feeling every inch of her lift and curve into his vacancies, hearing her moan and whimper and purr and whisper to him, branding her skin with his mouth, convincing her never to love another man but him, getting them both drunk on this, then alright. He’s a goddamn fool.

That’s fine.

It’s worth it.

More, is all he thinks, rolling over and over again, the warmth flooding out and through his veins and arteries, carrying euphoria in its purest form to the ends of his extremities, and back again.

It’s a lengthy walk back to the big house when they finally make their way there, stopping every four or five steps to kiss one another, a hunger for each other’s lips irresistible even if it’s past midnight and dark as sin outside. They stifle the noises and climb the stairs silently, shutting the door of Rey’s room once they are both inside. Exhausted, they climb into bed clothed, under the blankets, both chilled from the cooled sand bringing their body temperatures down as they lay outside earlier, and when Ben falls asleep an hour later, his lips swollen from how much he’s asked of them, having kissed his Rey every way his brain had come up with, he falls asleep happy.

Has anyone ever loved kissing a girl this much before? he wondered.

“Shit. Are other people making out this good?” he whispers to his girl in the dark, making her chuckle under the heavy quilts of the Turquoise Room four-poster bed, “do other people have ‘this’?” His legs are twined through hers, his fingers in her hair, her breasts pressed against his chest, her thighs claiming one of his between hers.

“Hell no,” she tells him, with an Eskimo kiss and a peck on his lips, rubbing her mouth over his, savoring him back, “impossible.”
“Kiss me again, Ben,” she whispers. “Need to be closer to you.”

Tomorrow may come. Or Ben may just die happy tonight.

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