The North Shore

by strawberrycupcake_huckleberrypie

Summary

She knew immediately upon taking him in head-to-toe, he was definitely Ben Solo. He was here in the flesh, golden “It boy” of Hollywood. Third generation cinematic dynastic royalty. A-list star of the Kylo Ren movie trilogy.

Ben fucking Solo was in Rey’s video store.

Ben Solo had come to The Resistance.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The North Shore

Chapter 1

Resistance
"A woman’s place is in the resistance."
- Hayley Gilmore

The broad Tennessee River cuts a deep groove through the center of Chattanooga, leaving the southern, mountainous residents distanced from their northern neighbors. Ironically, even a hundred and fifty years later, somehow the city which hosted some of the most extreme battles of the American Civil War still finds comfort in labeling itself north and south ends.

The southern parts of Chattanooga, home to the tourist sites of Ruby Falls and Rock City, houses the posh families of Lookout Mountain, old Atlanta Coca-Cola money families who built their summer homes atop the picturesque mountain ridge bordering Georgia, the crumbling, charming suburbs skirting downtown curling beneath the mountain’s shoulders.

Urban sprawl from the city center had crept outward, leading a vibrant swath of varied demographics towards every edge of town, every direction until city eased into suburbs, which blended further into the rural.

Nestled against the opposite border of the Tennessee River lay the North Shore, a quaint, two-lane shopping and dining district which boasted the quirky, artsy collection of shops and eateries normally found in a college town like Chattanooga. Four bridges spanned the Tennessee River, connecting the northern and southern banks, including a walking bridge descending from the Arts District, home of the museum and aquarium, where you could meander along the wooden planked bridge leisurely, above a classic restored carousel in the green, expansive park below.

In summer, you could watch dozens of children of every race and size run squealing through the shooting water cannons, surrounded by picnic-lunchers and kite-fliers galore.

Everything about the North Shore shouted easy enjoyability, an ever-expanding collection of amusements, its citizens welcoming visitors and their money, offering everything from hand-scooped ice cream to running shoes and party dresses.

At the furthest, least exciting-looking edge of North Shore, behind a far more attractive two-story gingerbread restored house though, sits a low, concrete-colored, flat-topped building with a lilac door, brightly announcing it’s proud single sign under its awning, the owners of Resistance Video having never had the means to paint the door anything less whimsical than soft purple in favor of something more cinematic like red or black.
“It looks like a preschool,” Finn had reported to Rey when he first took stock of the building with its pastel door.

“It was a preschool,” Rey reminded him.

“It’s not very edgy,” he sighed at her, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s free,” she smiled back at him, knowing she’d won the debate.

The purple door stayed.

Rey knew Finn would have preferred a more James Dean-esque stamp on their joint business venture but, secretly she didn’t hate the overtly feminine touch of a purple door. She may not be some delicate prima donna but, that doesn’t mean she can’t appreciate a good pastel hue.

For a vintage VHS and DVD rental storefront, there were far more financial demands to be considered than paint cans and rock-and-roll aesthetic details.

The classic poster announcing “A Woman’s Place is in the Resistance”, the white-robed, dual-bunned, iconic heroine of Cosmic Battles wielding a blaster gun displayed behind the cash register proudly conveyed the heart behind Resistance Video.

No one was about to put the struggling repository of archaic, beloved cinema out of business, not even streaming services like Netflix, not if Rey Lowood had anything to say about it. This vault of aging, under-appreciated movies might be among the last of its kind but, it wouldn’t go down without a fight and what better way to express that than to emulate the original girl Rebel general herself.

Rey tattooed “I don’t need rescuing” on her left inner wrist, inspired by the princess and added a garland of red rosebuds beneath it, to remind herself thorns can be beautiful.

It was a life lesson she had started learning during a childhood of shitty foster homes and continued to master into adulthood as she navigated business ownership as a single woman.

None of those elements made for a pushover, and Rey was mostly proud of herself she could still appreciate sweetness in life, could still remember to tell herself true things most of the time, could still reach for the little things that mattered like friendship and carousel rides and vintage noir films and coffee.

Which sounded perfect right about now.

“Hey, want a mocha?” Rey shouted to the storeroom where Finn was working on the books.
It’s quiet in the shop. Not like “don’t say it’s quiet, you’ll jinx it and we’ll be packed in five minutes, knock on wood” but, literally, quiet as in “no customers yet today”.

“Yes. God, yes,” he shouted back, “iced. And a biscotti.”

Finn is good at handling the accounting, maybe even gifted at it but, it’s not the most exciting job and it tends to make both Finn and Rey crabby since they come close to being in the red most months. There may not be much market for classic films but, there are still some people with good taste around and a grungy corner of a artistic community is the surest place to find a horde of those movies to rent.

Or buy.

Rey and Finn aren’t choosy.

“K, back in a jif.” she hollered to him, locking the cash drawer and hopping off the three-legged wooden stool, grabbing her clutch. She had a punch card to use at Maz’s Mug a few doors down, and hopefully, she was due for a free latte.

“Wait! Peanut!” he called, using their shared nickname for one another, his head around the doorframe before she could walk out the door. “Get me a bagel, too!” he added.

Rey rolled her eyes at him and headed out, immediately squinting in the bright sunshine of the July midmorning.

North Shore is bubbling on this Saturday, just the sort of activity level the shopkeepers’ associations report about on their quarterly fliers while encouraging owners with expectations like pressure washing their buildings and sidewalk repair.

Bicyclists, walkers, and drivers share the roadway, parallel parking filling in along the storefronts, and as Rey steps into Maz’s coffee shop under the jingling bell, she takes her place behind no less than seven customers.

*Good for Maz, Rey thinks charitably, good for all of North Shore,* knowing, the people who opt for locally-crafted goods like coffee from Maz’s Mug instead of Starbucks on the southern end of town will likely be the same type to search for Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, and Humphrey Bogart films.

Rey scrolls through Instagram on her phone and wastes time texting Rose and Paige, a pair of sisters who are her best friends, about Rose’s seventh date tonight with her new love interest, and slowly creeps along behind the people in front of her, keeping pace without looking up as she approaches the counter.
“I don’t care!” she hears the man in front of her nearly scream into his phone.

“I don’t care!” he repeats, getting incrementally louder with each repetition, “I don’t care! Do you hear me? Do you speak English? I. Don’t. Fucking. Care! You’ve had the time to get this right and yet you haven’t! I do not care what it takes, get it right or you’re out!”

He would be impossible not to overhear at this volume and proximity, so it’s not so much that Rey is eavesdropping so much as it is he’s breaking the sound barrier.

The back of his neck is strained, tight and flushed as he yells angrily into his phone, his skin tone nearly blending seamlessly into his red hair. Rey takes a minute step backward, distancing herself from the drama instinctively. Her body retreats at the sound of impending storms every time she’s faced with fight-or-flight and this man is a walking tornado.

“Double espresso,” he curtly orders as soon as he steps close enough to the counter to be at the front of the line. He busies himself on the phone, moving his fingers as tensely as he used his voice on the prior phone call and drops a five dollar bill on the counter, waiting for change. Kaydel, Maz’s barista, rings him up.

“Um, that’s $5.21,” she tentatively informs him, picking up his five dollar bill.

Rey can see him glare at Kaydel from where she stands over his shoulder.

“What?! Are you fucking kidding me? For one shitty double espresso from Podunk U.S.A.?” he demands, incredulously. Kaydel just looks at him, dumbstruck, still holding his five.

“Here,” Rey says, reaching around the irate redhead, dropping a quarter on the counter beside Kaydel’s hand, “I got it.” She wants this dude to shut up and move along. He’s clearly upsetting Kaydel, as well as Rey, not to mention potentially anyone within a two-mile radius.

The man turns to Rey to see who deposited the change on the counter. He looks her up and down with a sneer and rolls his eyes. If Rey thought he would thank her she was sorely mistaken as he merely groans and responds with a haughty, “good God.”

Rey moves towards Kaydel as the man walks away to the end of the counter awaiting his pricey coffee, and she heaves a noisy exhale accompanying a knowing eye roll towards Kaydel who smiles appreciatively in return as Rey orders herself an iced vanilla latte, a mocha for Finn, biscotti for them both and the bonus bagel.

“You ok?” she asks Kaydel, quietly.

“Oh yeah, fine,” the barista answers her while making change.

“We’ve just been busy here. Somebody is shooting a movie downtown and we’ve had a major influx of people today. Crazy busy,” Kaydel tells her.
“Sweet! Maybe they’ll bring in lots of business all along North Shore,” Rey enthuses. “If anyone needs a movie for inspiration, you know where to tell them to head,” she reminds her with a wink.

“You got it, girl,” Kaydel tells her with a smile, handing her change.

Rey keeps a wide berth of the redhead with the anger management problem while she waits for her drinks and treats in the shop, answering the last six texts from Rose and Paige she’s missed in the last four minutes. Rose is really excited to be going out with Gun again tonight and wants both her sister and Rey weighing in on clothing options.

Rose is a petite, Asian sweetheart of a girl, blessed with sweet curves with a divine smile, Rey’s closest friend since the fourth grade, and Gun, a former Marine with a rifle tattoo that spans his entire right forearm is exactly her type.

Rose is downright swooning over him and it makes Rey simultaneously thrilled for her best friend and a touch envious.

To: Rose, Paige
From: Rey
11:40 am
OMG that looks incredible. I vote YES.

Rey sends a thumbs-up emoji, replying to the photo Rose sent of herself in a sundress under a cross-body bag and turned her phone off as she reached for her coffees and snacks. It was only about three blocks back to Resistance and Rey knew this route by heart, traveling it every day, give or take.

It occurred to her often enough if she’d forgo the daily take-out coffee habit, she may break more than even every month on expenses for the store but, you only live once and it’s the little things in life and the secret to a happy life is continual, small treats, she reminded herself.

Having grown up without a permanent set of parents meant Rey relied on way too many platitudes to coach her through life but, they helped her keep her chin up. That had to be better than the alternative, right? Whatever that may be?

To: Rey, Paige
From: Rose
11: 48 am
Squee! K! Will wear. Cannot deal, so excited.

May finally put out tonight.
Rey stopped right in front of the door at Resistance, facing away from the glaring sun to read her text from Rose. Rose had been thinking about sleeping with Gun for a couple weeks now and that text deserved a prompt reply.

She balanced the coffees, the food, her clutch and her phone, and prepared to respond to Rose while reaching for the door handle. She was so adept at this routine, she didn’t even look up, barely thought about the process which was why she was unprepared for the crash of the door swinging into her body, effectively sending her flying.

Her body collided with a solid figure, more a wall than a human, as the coffees went flying, splashing herself and the other person attempting to use the door at the same time.

He must have been exiting while she was entering, and neither of them had seen the other. Rey stammered and gasped with the chill of the icy coffee as it splattered her tank top and arms generously, dropping her phone and clutch to the ground, left holding nothing but the empty disposable, cardboard tray in her hand, and the paper bag of food under the crook of her arm.

She was still catching her breath from the chill of the splattered coffee, and the shock of the strike when she pulled back to see who or what she had crashed into.

Looking up, she realized it was neither a wall nor a regular person, but a living, breathing, beautiful human man and she felt herself revert immediately to her middle school self, stammering and forgetting how to be graceful.

Looking further, she realized he was covered in dark chocolate mocha sauce from Finn’s spilled drink.

A second after that, she realized he wasn’t just any beautiful man, which would have been bad enough, he was a goddamn famous, beautiful, human man.

“Oh dear God,” Rey whispered, “I am so sorry.”

She reached to help him clean his shirt but really, what was her plan here? How do you clean coffee out of someone’s shirt while they’re wearing it and it’s all but absorbed?

She blushed deep magenta, felt her entire face burning with immense embarrassment and decided she would be okay with dying on the spot, right then and there.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” her partner in the debacle said, helping her retrieve the dropped items, handing her phone back to her with a grimace, both of them realizing the glass was completely intact but wholly shattered.

“Aw, fuck, I’m sorry about that,” he said, tsking at her phone.
“Oh, it’s fine - it’s fine,” she lied. She had been on a payment plan to the phone company for this phone for 11 months already and had no insurance on it.

*Damn it,* she thought.

“Oh God,” she held the door open for him, “come in and at least let me get you, like, a paper towel or something,” she waved him inside behind her, propping the door open with her free hand, still juggling empty cups and a bag of smooshed pastries, “God, I am so sorry, again,” she assured him.

“No, no, it was my fault. I wasn’t looking,” he argued gently.

He followed her inside Resistance, the shop seeming entirely too small a space for him immediately, Rey realized, as she walked behind the small counter to find a towel to help the man clean up.

He was one very tall, dark, incredibly handsome drink of water, that’s for damn sure, but, he was no stranger to Rey.

She knew immediately upon taking him in, head-to-toe, he was *definitely* Ben Solo, in the flesh, golden It boy of Hollywood, third generation cinematic dynastic royalty, A-list star of the Kylo Ren movie trilogy.

Ben *fucking* Solo was in Rey’s video store.

Someone needed to show up and shake her out of this dream because she was sure that must be what was happening.

On second thought, never mind.

Dreaming is fine.

“Here,” she said, handing him a roll of paper towels, “use this.”

She pushed her hair out of her eyes and ripped one off to use herself, wiping at her bare arms and cream colored tank top, mopping up what she could off her jeans below that, none of her ministrations making much of a difference now that she was more latte-colored than anything else, and saw him use a paper towel to do the same.

Looking up, she saw his hands slow as his gaze shifted behind her, over the top of her head to the poster of the princess announcing where a woman’s place rightfully was.

He stared emotionless at it, still absently scrubbing at the coffee staining his black v-neck t-shirt, nothing but a splotchy area and a lingering coffee scent to whisper to anyone about the mishap.
“There she is,” he said, eyes trained on the princess on the poster behind Rey's head.

“Yeah, she’s…uh, there,” Rey replied inelegantly, letting the gravity of it all settle on her.

*Shit, that’s his mom,* he realized. *His real-life mom, Leia Organa, and he now gets why this store is called Resistance Video. And that I’m her fan. And *shit.* Ugh, awkward.*

“You’re a fan, huh?” he lets his molten eyes land on Rey and she forgets English is her first language.

*Deflection is easier than being direct, answer questions with a question,* she coaches herself.

“Aren’t we all?” she answers, tossing her paper towel in the trash can and reaching for his, uncharitably making a humorous side note to herself she could make a pretty penny on eBay with Ben Solo’s discarded paper towel if she were so inclined. There would be some fangirls who would pay top dollar for that shit.

He smiled at her but didn’t respond, just looked around, turning to scan the shelves stocked floor to ceiling with VHS boxes and DVD cases.

“This is something else,” he said distractedly, surveying the stash of movies and the walls lined with memorabilia posters.

“Yeah,” Rey said, moving out from behind the narrow countertop. “I love movies, I’m sort of a buff.”

“You own this place?” he asked her, running his hand over the cases.


*Smooth, idiot,* she reprimanded herself.

“Huh,” he nodded slowly, still perusing the shelves. “I was in here a minute ago, wondered if you have any Marx Brothers.”
“Oh yeah, sure, look…,” she motioned to a shelf two cases away. “Here’s *Duck Soup* and *Horse Feathers*. Personally, I recommend *A Night at the Opera* though,” she said, professionally, handing him the title.

“You own this place *and* you give personalized viewing advice,” he mused, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, I mean, what sort of movie buff would I be if I didn’t?” she defended herself.

*Is he offended? Amused? He’s a movie star, he makes these for a living, he doesn’t want my stupid opinions on movies, shut up, Rey,* she insisted.

This was more like an out-of-body experience than a dream she was stuck in.

“You a big Marx Brothers fan?” he asked.

*Be adorable, bat your eyelashes, he’s used to Hollywood starlets and big tits,* she coached herself, but, she immediately overrode that instinct, knowing she was out of her depth, no chance at beguiling a Hollywood movie star by batting her stupid, non-starlet eyelashes.

She just went with honesty instead.

“Honestly, I’m more the Hepburn type,” she admitted.

“Which one?” he asked, a smile changing his lips.

“Both,” she told him unashamedly. “Katherine and Audrey. I’m a completist.”

It was the legitimate truth, too.

She’d seen and nearly knew by heart every, single Katherine Hepburn and Audrey Hepburn movie ever made.

He was definitely smirking. “Are you now?” he asked, his eyes twinkling a little at her, something playful behind them.
God damn, this is why they make all those gifs and memes about him, she thought. He’s fucking magical.

Rey turned around on her heel, her face heating up again, her armpits starting to sweat, her mouth going dry.

She headed back to the safety behind the counter, trying to put some distance between herself and the hulking, stupidly good-looking man in her store when she remembered she had a business partner and best friend as he rounded the corner and laid eyes on their singular customer.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Finn gasped, wide-eyed and dead in his tracks.

“Finn,” Rey cut in, jumping to grab him by the forearm, eager to dissuade him from being overtly dramatic.

This was a small space, after all, and there was no need to make everyone here even more uncomfortable than they already were. Besides, she had just been having a nice, normal conversation with the famous handsome man, no need to get all weird about it all of a sudden.

She felt a surge of possession and protective instinct sweep through her, hoping she could disarm the moment for the actor’s sake as well as her own.

“Hey, um, Peanut, our coffees spilled, can you get another round, please? From down at Maz’s?” she stood directly in front of Finn, bobbing in front of his eyes, holding his biceps in her hands, making sure to engage his line of sight directly, before shoving him unceremoniously out the door while he sputtered and argued.

Once she had closed the door behind Finn, she turned to see Ben Solo looking at the wall behind her again, at the princess poster.

“So, uh, do you want that Marx Brothers movie?” she asked, hopeful to reestablish the conversation or at least redirect it somewhere less tense.

“Actually, do you have any ‘Cosmic Battles’?” he asked, still looking at the poster. Of his mom, her brain finished.

“Yeah, of course,” she said, grabbing a copy of Rebound of the Star Knights off the furthest shelf.

Shaking his head gently, she glimpses a cloud of something unnamable passed in front of his
expressive eyes.

Still looking at the DVD case he said, “Something to be said for figuring out what you’re good at and sticking with it, I guess.”

_He sounded…blue? Was that it? Rey wondered._

“Well, you know what they say, ‘love what you do and you’ll never work a day in your life’,” she couldn’t stop herself from using her old crutch, spouting off a proverb instead of vulnerably engaging a conversation.

"Is that what they say?" he asked, catching her eyes and holding them there in that sticky way he had, Rey jolting, all cute proverbs and smart adages floating up above her head, inaccessible.

"That's what I hear," she breathed, falling, falling, falling.

“Hey, thanks,” he said, his eyes returning to normal, friendly and composed. He handed her a $20 bill and pushed her hand further towards herself when she offered change, telling her, “keep it.”

His hand stilled on her skin before letting go, catching her wrist and turning it over so he could examine her tattoo.

“Don’t need rescuing, huh?” he asked her, his thumb moving slightly so he could see the edges of the entire artwork.

Rey was speechless, her wrist caught and dwarfed in his hand.

She met his eyes, her heart striking so hard she could feel it in the changing rhythm.

She nodded, very much feeling like she was a liar, she did _indeed_ need saving and right this very minute, actually.

This man was a love wizard, a love demon, a love sorcerer with his fucking bottomless eyes and his imploring gaze.

_Holy hell, she thought._

“Lucky,” he told her, right into her eyes, right into her soul. “Don’t need rescuing,” he repeated, still holding her wrist.
Something like the pull of a wave, the drag of a magnet passed between them.

A second after it dawned on her just how long he’d been touching her, he released her wrist and stepped towards the door.

He reached for the door handle and Rey felt panic strike her heart.

*He’s leaving,* her mind hammered.

“Oh,” he said, turning around before opening the door, “sorry, again. About the phone. Really. That was my bad.”

“Seriously, don’t worry,” Rey said, and then, anxious to communicating sincerely with him, knowing it to be her last chance to do so, she added bravely, directly, ‘‘*let the past die*. Isn’t that what they say? ‘*Kill it, if you have to*’?”

His smile spread slowly. It was the Kylo Ren line. The famous one.

He got it. He understood her.

His eyes sparked with acknowledgment.

*She* knew he was Ben Solo.

*He* knew he was Ben Solo.

He knew that *she knew* he was Ben Solo.

“Yeah,” that was his real smile he was sending her before moving to leave, unguarded, raw, one she’d never seen on screen, “that’s what they say…”

“Rey,” she supplied.

“Rey,” he repeated.

He stood there a second more, dissolving her with his hypnotic eyes, and then turned to leave, opened the door and stepped through, pulled it closed tightly behind him and walked away.
Rey held her breath till he was out of sight and then she fucking collapsed onto the floor, flat on her back, arms splayed wide, staring blankly at the ceiling until Finn returned and crouched at her side and screamed his head off, shaking her by the shoulders while she laughed hysterically, both finally releasing all the pent-up drama they’d stored.

They danced around the shop yelling like that for 10 solid minutes, repeating every single word of Rey’s conversation with Ben Solo at least four times, insisting to one another what a dreamboat he was, deciding who they needed to call and text and in what order and then they unanimously turned on the first Kylo Ren movie in the trilogy on the mounted TV above the front corner near the wide window at the front of the shop and decided to order in lunch while they binge-watched all three movies till closing.

This was a cinematic emergency event.

Shut it down, shut it all down, everything else, this was a once-in-a-lifetime, dream-come-true, honest-to-God, miraculous moment.

It was a real-life fairy tale but, better.

No movie could top this.

No John Hughes, no JJ Abrams, no Steven Spielberg could have directed that scene better than destiny itself had.

Looking at the TV above, Rey knew by heart what would happen in every scene they were about to watch on film but, she knew it would in no way hold a candle to what she had just lived through.

Ben Solo had come to her shop.

Ben Solo had come to The Resistance.

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Chapter End Notes

Comments and Kudos clear skin and ease cramps.
It's science.
xo
come be my person on tumblr or twitter
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Embrace reality even if it burns you.
- Pierre Bergé

To: Rey
From: Rose
8:41 am
Reyrey, just saw he’s shooting a movie in the abandoned warehouses down at the foot of Lookout. Streets roped off by police - Crazy!

Rose was way behind if she thought Rey hadn’t already scavenged all the information available on Ben Solo’s presence in Chattanooga from every news source and social media site in existence. She’d let Rose believe she was offering new information but let’s be honest, Rey’d been hardcore investigating the movie star since he left her shop yesterday and she was still levitating remembering her interaction with him.

They say Tom Cruise is short in real life and Clark Gable had halitosis but this was Rey’s first real exposure to a film actor and if anything, the camera had not done him justice.

Ben Solo was the kind of tall girls adore - the sort of tall you had to lift your chin to look up at, the kind of tall that made you feel hemmed in and adorable just by standing near him.

He was handsome in a unique way, the sort of face that demands scrutinious attention, the sort of face Rey could stare at and appreciate for hours, and he had an aire of mystery which made it all come together into something smoldering and fine as all hell. He was stacked and hewn and coiffed like a goddamn work of art but, the pièce de résistance was those Kylo Ren signature black-onyx eyes, swinging between playful charm, wicked shadiness, and alluring eroticism on camera.

Even so, Rey had found out yesterday the look she’d preferred the best was the totally disarmed, cripplingly naked gaze that accompanied his actual smile. The real-looking one.

That one fucking murdered her.

The camera could capture his charisma, his art, his technique, but, it hadn’t ever grasped what she’d glimpsed yesterday. That was pure Ben Solo, not Kylo Ren, and Rey was a fan.

To: Rose
From: Rey
8:43 am
Why are you texting me?
Are you home yet?
HOW WAS IT TELL MEEEE

Rose had a date last night, Rey reminded herself, an important one with Gun, and she needed updates. She chided herself for centering their text conversation on her nonsensical musings about a chance encounter with a famous person when her best friend had a real-life romantic interlude with her man.

Time to reenter reality, she reminded herself, *you have to be a friend to get a friend.*

To: Rey
From: Rose
8:45 am
Just got home a while ago.
EEEEEEEKKKKK
so. much. to. tell.
Brunch at 11? Taco Mamacita?

Yes, absolutely, *tacos and margaritas were definitely the way to cover this material*, Rey thought. *Work hard, play hard.*

To: Rose
From: Rey
8:46 am
YES GRL YES
Wanna hear the deets.
will txt Paige
meet you there.
ox

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At 11:00 am, Rey walked to the doors of Taco Mamacita as the restaurant opened and was ushered to a booth towards the back where she would await her party while starting in on the chips and salsa placed promptly on her table.

It was a good thing she was there first, as Finn had caught wind of the brunch plan when she inverted her texts with the sisters with her simultaneous texts with him, her broken phone screen
throwing her texting game off.
He had invited himself to join her plans with Rose and Paige, and naturally, Rey assumed that meant his boyfriend, Poe would be coming, too.

Finn, Poe, and the Tico sisters arrived about three minutes later, kisses and hugs all around, and praised Rey for getting a table and appetizers available as they all climbed into seats in the booth beside her noisily.

Rose was glowing from the inside-out, that much was evident, and Rey wasted no time directing her to the hot seat for immediate questioning as soon as everyone was seated and drink orders were received by the server.

“So. Rosie. Tell us. How was it?” Rey began, lacing her hands together on the table in front of her, leaning in on elbows, giving this her full attention.

Everyone present had known one another for many years, had experienced the highs and lows of love lives together as a tight-knit circle of friends, having grown up together since middle school. Only Poe was a more recent addition to the group since his relationship had begun with Finn four years earlier in community college but, even in the last four years, he had seen plenty of the ups and downs of the Tico girls’ and Rey’s romantic histories.

Rose loaded a chip with a heaping scoop of salsa and dropped it into her mouth, grinning tight-lipped around it, teasingly looking up at the ceiling, avoiding answering intentionally, causing everyone to groan, nudge her shoulder and whine in protest.

She was enjoying this moment and her satisfaction was palpable.

“Rose Tico, come on. Give,” Finn prompted her, spreading the drinks to each of the correct recipients as they were placed on the table before him.

Rose gave them each a wide smile, stooped to draw a long sip of her drink and laced her own fingers together on the table, mirroring Rey.

Giving a huge sigh she announced, “you guys. I got laid. And let me tell you this, it was glorious.”

She was positively radiant at this confession, eliciting a round of whoops and shouts of go, girl, and yes and oh yeah, that’s what I thought you said from each of the people at the table.

“I’ve never been prouder,” Paige announced, grabbing a chip and popping it into her mouth.

“Details!” Rey prompted her, “tell us more! What happened!”

“Was it good?”
“Was it amazing?”
“Was he generous?”
“Did you stay over?”

Rose laughed and waved both hands at them, laughing till her shoulders shook, motioning for them to back off but, they were undeterred. This was not a group of friends you kept information from.
“Okay, okay,” she acquiesced, “yes, it was amazing. He’s very…attuned to a woman’s needs if you know what I mean. It was maybe the best sex of my life. And then the second time was even better than that!” she recounted, which fetched a whole new round of whooping and hollering and high-fives.

“And,” she continued, “yes, I slept over, mostly because I fell asleep but also because, you guys, he held me and he has the most amazing arms. I mean, you’ve seen them, they don’t call him ‘Gun’ for nothing. I swear to God, it was almost as good as the sex.”

With this, she sighed and smiled, helping herself to another chip, a far-off look in her eyes. Rey was captivated.

It had been close to a year since her last interesting date and almost that long since she’d had sex. She was in the midst of a serious dry spell herself, and even in her strongest relationship status hadn’t enjoyed the experience of lying helplessly cocooned all night, content, safe, and blissful in a pair of strong arms like Rose was describing, the way she saw in movies.

“So, when’s the wedding?” Poe asked, draining his Corona and waving the server over, holding up the bottle and the empty basket of chips requesting refills of both with a wink.

“Haha, very funny,” Rose admonished him, shoulder-checking him in mock laughter. “I will tell you this though, he’s officially my boyfriend now so, maybe just go ahead and get used to that for a minute,” she told them, holding up her half-empty margarita glass, waiting for clinks from her friends’ glasses.

She wasn’t disappointed, as they each gave another round of approval with cheers and teasing and toasting.

“My little Rosie,” Rey intoned wistfully, pretending bittersweet sorrow, “all grown up and getting laid by a proper boyfriend.”

She smiled at her best friend and felt her heart crack the slightest bit as her foothold on first priority status shifted in Rose’s life. Perhaps she felt the bitter a touch more than she let on but, she dutifully made the sweetness of her joy mask her face solely with cheer.

She really liked Gun, and she loved Rose. This was no time for jealousy or resentment or competition.

“How about you, little Miss ‘Run-in With a Famous Actor’,” Rose raised her eyebrows at Rey, turning the conversation and each face towards her.

“What about me?” Rey responded, her face heating.

“Tell us details!” Paige begged, shaking her head a little in disbelief Rey was avoiding.

“You guys heard everything already,” Rey told them, looking down at her drink, swirling the straw
in her strawberry margarita intently.

“We heard facts, now we need the intimate minutiae,” Rose told her, slurping her slushy drink with enthusiasm.

Rey was trying so hard to keep her head out of the clouds, keep her feet on the ground, stay reasonable.

In her experience, life was sweet but, not fair and it was better not to let yourself get all worked up over things like yesterday for too long. She had enjoyed the surreal thrill of it and indulged herself afterward, soaking it all up and luxuriating in the pleasure of that event but honestly, it wouldn’t benefit her to live in a dream world about it too long.

_Dreams don’t work unless you do_, she reminded herself, _dreams don’t pay bills._

“I mean, it was amazing to meet such a talented actor, especially in that scenario,” she said, her head still tilting towards her drink, trying her hardest to downplay the retelling.

She didn’t want to garner attention for what she knew had been her one-sided, lust-addled moment of flabbergasted idiocy, and she wanted this brunch to be about Rose and her night with Gun. She also secretly didn’t want to focus so hard on dissecting the meeting with Ben Solo it caused the harsh daylight of reality to remove the final sheen of a hazy memory she packaged for herself neatly.

“At least tell us what he’s like, like for real,” Paige insisted.

“Well…,” Rey began, her thoughts all fighting for center stage.

Should she start with his physical features? His dreamy eyes, his luscious mouth, his heavenly scent?... How dominating and overwhelming he was in person? His massive hands, his broad shoulders, his confident vibe?... Or maybe his nature, curious and polite, blurring the simmering temptation underneath?... Or how he made her feel dangerous and trembling and expectant, like a lit firecracker held in your hand?

_Nope_, she decided, _not that._

“He was…he was…,” she’s faltering, resolving what to share and how much when Finn rescues her.

“He was hot as hell, I’ll tell you that much,” Finn abruptly interjected.

“Hey now,” Poe complained.

“Baby, you know I love you. But, seriously. That Ben Solo is one _sexy_ motherfucker,” Finn patted his boyfriend’s knee and shook his head as he spoke, still processing.
“Dude. Did you see his chest in the last Kylo Ren movie? I couldn’t do anything but giggle like a teeny bopper for five solid minutes in the middle of the theater when I saw that,” Rose confessed.


“Everything about that was hot as effing blazes,” Rose said, fanning herself. “My favorite fanfic writer said he was a ‘gloriously debauched meth’d-out rock god’ in that movie, when he pulls off the helmet and he’s all beaten and messed up and whew, I could not agree more.”

“Yeah well, he was only interested in Rey so, no need for you to worry, babe,” Finn comforted Poe, looking him in the eye, smiling.

“Oh yeah?” Poe turned to Rey, “you turned the Hollywood big shot’s head, eh, Rey baby?”

“Oh my God you guys, no,” Rey insisted, shaking her head vehemently, “he was just interested in finding a movie.”

“Yeah,” Finn teased, everyone laughing, “if by ‘finding a movie’ you mean ‘looking at your ass’.”

Rey shoved him hard, “ stop it, insane. C’mon.”

“I’m for real!” Finn told her, “you didn’t see what I saw, he was checking you out hard, girl.”

Everyone listening bobbed between Rey and Finn, observing the exchange.

“Right. I’m sure. The famous, gorgeous Hollywood movie star was interested in checking out my small-town, coffee-stained ass,” Rey argued, rolling her eyes hard.

“All I’m saying is, I don’t think the heat in the shop yesterday was because we like to keep our electricity bill down,” Finn finished, raising his eyebrows suggestively, taking a swig of his beer.

“Gimme a break. No one thinks about me like that, least of all him,” Rey concluded, feeling she’d buttoned up the conversation.

“Why do you do that?” Rose interrupted, staring Rey down.

“Why do I do what?”

“Deny what someone says to praise you. Deny you deserve a happy surprise. Act ignorant of how beautiful and wonderful you are.”

After a minute, Rey is wilting under Rose’s intense look and she drops her gaze to her drink, stirring her straw determinedly again.

“Some people do think of you like that, Reyrey. They do. You are lovable and worthy and beautiful and any man would be crazy to overlook you, celebrity or not,” Rose tells her, insistent and sure.

Rey smiles sweetly at her. “You’re my person,” she tells Rose.

“Yes, and you’re the wind beneath my wings, can we please find those tacos already?” Rose says changing topics, looking over her shoulder for the server, apparently finished with the interrogation and counseling session.
Rey smiled gratefully at her circle of goofball friends as the food arrived and they hungrily dove in, ordering another round of drinks and chips. This was her family, and she was thankful they wanted to know even the silly specifics of a chance encounter like yesterday’s run-in with Ben Solo.

She wrinkled her nose in awe of her good fortune and joined in on devouring her food.

*****

Monday was sure to be a scorcher, Rey knew it before she left the apartment, and she chose an A-line skirt and tank above her flip-flops to stay cool as she grabbed her bag and keys to walk to Resistance to open for the day.

Sure enough, it was 80 and sunny and she felt her whole face screw up to fight the sunshine as she marched towards the shop, promising herself a blended, sugary coffee from Maz’s as soon as Finn arrived in a half hour to cover the register.

_Not that anyone interesting is coming into the store today, Rey reminded herself. Just, you know. In case._

Rounding the corner, she dug her keys out of her messenger bag at her hip as she approached the shop, stooping to gather a FedEx package as she unlocked the purple door. Inside, she flipped on the cheap lights and set her bag and keys on the counter, realizing she wasn’t actually expecting a FedEx package today.

She kept an accurate track of movie shipment arrivals, knowing in this seedier end of North Shore, anyone was liable to snag a package off the front step and check the movie title later.

Once, she’d even had someone bring an unwanted, stolen movie back to Resistance and drop it off anonymously.

Evidently, they weren’t Bette Davis fans.

_Dumbasses_, Rey had eye rolled and correctly judged.

This FedEx package wasn’t the normal shape for a VHS or DVD case and ripping it open her breath caught in her chest as she saw it was an iPhone box, brand new and factory sealed. She pulled the paperwork out of the packaging and unfolded it, wondering whether this was a delivery for someone else.

Opening it she read:
To: Rey Who Doesn’t Need Rescuing  
Long live the Resistance.  
- BS 

_Holy Mother Francis hot damn_, Rey thought, slapping a hand over her shocked mouth. _You’ve got to be kidding me._ 

She turned the paperwork over, blinked twice to be sure she wasn’t projecting a daydream and shook her head, making sense of this turn of events. 

_He bought me a phone_, she realized slowly. _He bought me a phone. He shipped me a phone. And he wrote me a goddamn note!_ 

It was sinking in but, not fast enough. She needed to sit down. Her legs found their way to the wooden stool behind the counter as she replayed Saturday’s collision with Ben Solo in her head, holding the iPhone receipt in her hand, looking at the place he’d been standing in the very room. 

_I need to thank him_, Rey concluded. 

She thought about how that would play out, how insignificant she was, how forgettable, and then she realized he hadn’t forgotten her, hadn’t treated her broken phone, her trouble as insignificant. 

She thought through how embarrassed she’d be if he hadn’t actually bought the phone, if he’d had an assistant do it, if she was even more mistaken than that and it was all a misunderstanding, how vulnerable she’d be to seek him out with thanks for something he hadn’t had a hand in. 

She thought about how hot he was, how fucking beautiful, and how much a part of her wanted to feel her skin flare with his nearness, how she wanted to fucking breathe him in a little like a lunatic and see what he smelled like, how she would like to touch his skin, his hair, his pretty mouth. 

She thought how incredibly unrealistic that was. 

And then, she thought about Rose’s words to her at brunch the day before. 
_“Why do you do that…Deny you deserve a happy surprise…”_ and she thought…_maybe I won’t deny myself._ 

This was a surprise, after all, and a happy one. 
Maybe there was no harm in walking it out, seeing what came of it. 

Tomorrow Resistance was closed, every Sunday and Tuesday off. 
Tomorrow maybe she’d go find the sender of the happy surprise. 

_Maybe,_ she promised herself. _Just to thank him. Just to affirm happy surprises can happen, even_
for me.

She pushed a copy of All About Eve into the store’s VHS player and smiled to herself as she waited for the tape to roll, and agreed with Bette Davis on this one.

She should also buckle up.
This maybe was about to be a bumpy ride.

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Chapter End Notes

as always, thanks to my beta, uselessenglishmajor.

She’s originator of that fantastic description of Kylo: “‘gloriously debauched meth’d-out rock god’.”

Next Chapter Wednesday <3

10 points if you've seen "All About Eve" and can attest how amazing Bette Davis is.
15 if you can spot a young Marilyn Monroe.

Kudos are awarded 25 points for your Hogwarts house.
Comments receive 50 point. Each.

xo
- Strawberry
Resolve

Chapter Summary

Intros:

*Gun, Original Character from the legendary Interstellar Transmissions by @LovelyThings & @ricca_riot
*Malaak (or "Mal"), Original Character from the incomparable Free 2 Fall by @uselessenglishmajor
*Kylo Ren, alter ego of Ben Solo here, based on the biker version of him in the excellent Only If You Want To by @Violetwilson
Chapter 3
Resolve

“Resolve will melt no rocks. But it can scale them.”
- George Eliot

Whatever Rey had envisioned all day Monday as she weighed the pros and cons of going to seek Ben Solo to thank him for the gift of her new phone melted into a pool of nervous self-doubt as she
approached the edge of the vacated warehouse district in the shadow of Lookout Mountain.

It was a quick 10-minute Uber drive from her apartment but, Rey immediately regretted letting her driver deposit her at the edge of the cordoned-off street when she saw the police presence restraining the hordes of fans already present.

She did a quick mental sweep of herself, comparing her appearance with the mass of women, and some men who clung to the cell phones in their hands, ready to document a glimpse of the actors on this movie set, and second-guessed her wardrobe choices.

She had only thrown on some jeans remembering a TV show which once suggested shorts were solely intended for the beach and Disney World and had not changed her Guns N’ Roses t-shirt or stepped out of her flip-flops. She was surrounded by people who had obviously put some thought into making an impression on anyone who noticed them but, Rey looked more like a college student with a concert habit.

She pulled her hair into a bun haphazardly as she approached the barricades and lengthened her neck as regally as possible, hoping to channel Audrey Hepburn.

*Comparison is the thief of joy,* she reminded herself and walked with her head held intentionally high.

The police presence was laughable astride the crowd, the officers as much enraptured with watching the actors doing takes of one scene over and over, Rey realized, and soon she blended near enough to the set she could see if not hear what everyone was watching.

Ben Solo was front and center, a black leather jacket over a white t-shirt, leaning menacingly against a Harley-Davidson motorcycle as he smoked a cigarette before carelessly flicking it to the ground, standing to full height and throwing a punch at the man opposite him in the scene.

This wasn’t Ben Solo from her video store though, Rey knew, *this* was Kylo Ren, Las Vegas-based, conflicted hitman and struggling lone wolf.

Rey watched nearly a half-dozen takes, completely mesmerized by him, his every action fascinating, his dangerous vibe positively obscene. She watched the professional near-miss of his thrown punch, the choreography of his fight with his co-star and their easy banter after each take was completed, slapping one another on the back and helping each other from the ground.

She vaguely heard the director call cut and saw all the actors dispersing to trailers, Ben Solo marching out of sight in an instant when she realized she was epically unprepared with a strategy for actually reaching the famous actor she was intending to intercept. She saw him only from a distance and had no way to approach him, what with the crowd and barricades and police presence.

*Shit,* she thought, *why didn’t I anticipate any of this?*

She pulled out her phone, shaking her head a little at her own naivety, intending to get an Uber as fast as possible to retrieve her.
She spent time reproaching herself, *this was just not ever going to work, what had she been thinking* when a hand reached out and grabbed her elbow, a commanding voice accompanying it.

“Miss, come with me,” the man said, spearing fear into Rey’s heart. He was massive and covered in tattoos, the artwork climbing his neck from his arms, and he was so immense and determined, Rey felt herself tugged past the barricades in shock before she could resist or argue.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she began, unsure what she had done to get in trouble but willing to apologize anyhow. He walked her right past all the cops, still holding her elbow, while she held her phone and she looked sideways at him to see his name-tag swinging from a long silver chain around his neck, a label reading CREW adhered beneath his photo.

*He even looks intimidating in his thumbnail picture, she thought.*

The bulky man stopped walking at the door of a trailer and used the flat of his fist to pound twice on the door before opening it, holding the door for Rey and dropping her elbow, gesturing her towards the steps leading inside. He raised his eyebrows in mild annoyance when she didn’t move, paralyzed by her uncertainty.

“Rey,” a voice from the inside of the trailer came. She knew that voice. She knew it from the movies and also from her shop a few days ago.

She took a step up the unfolded stairs and walking into the trailer saw Ben Solo, his discarded leather prop jacket on the table beside him, a water bottle in his hand. Rey clasped her arms around herself in a hug and gulped a little, feeling a little lightheaded.

“I saw you out there, just wanted to say hi,” he said, “sorry if Mal scared you.”

*Talk, she prompted herself. Speak, dummy.*

“Your assistant’s name means ‘bad’?” she asked, the only thing she could think to say. He smirked at her, “actually, he’s my bodyguard and it’s Malaak. It means ‘angel’ in Arabic, or so he tells me. I think he might prefer your assumption though.”

“Huh,” Rey responds. Every word that comes out of this man’s mouth leaves her speechless.

*Oh God, he does have an incredible mouth, she thinks, staring a little, slapping the thought away before she slips into an unreasonable daydream.*
“Well, um, I just came because I wanted to say thank you,” she says, waving her phone at him a little, “for the phone. That was crazy generous of you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he says, taking a swig of his water bottle. He runs his hand through his hair, lifting it from his face and tells her, “it was my fault yours broke, anyway.”

“Well, it was a lovely thing to do. Really,” she insists, then nodding once in approval she adds, “you’re a good egg, Ben Solo.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks, apparently signaling two can play at Rey’s game of volleying questions back and forth, a smile gracing his face.

“Think so,” she answers, “still deciding.”
She’s not so much being coy as she is just trying to keep up with the conversation, stay breathing and not pee her pants all at the same time. It takes some concentration and being this close to him is draining her excess brain power.

“You want to sit down?” he asks, motioning to the couch beside him but, Rey doesn’t move an inch, still standing with arms wrapped securely around her own body, one step inside the door.

“Oh no, that’s okay, you’re working. I just wanted to say thank you and you know, just…thank you,” she isn’t sure if that’s significant enough a reason to have shown up to his place of work but, she has nothing to add to it so she just reaches for the door handle, wondering if the scary bodyguard is out there, standing on the other side.

“Wait,” he says, standing. “Uh, are you free later?”

Rey turns back to him and analyzes the man in front of her as if for the first time.

This isn’t Kylo Ren anymore, this is Ben Solo, and his bare inquiry gives him away immediately. His face has transformed from movie star to regular guy instantly, albeit a gorgeous one, his eyes offering something similar to an imploring look, his tone distinctly urgent.

“Yes!” she nearly yells at him, reeling in her startling effort to assure him that yes, she’s free tonight and also, she wants to have his babies when she mentally hits a roadblock and realizes she isn’t, in fact, free.

“Oh. Wait. No, damn, I’m not,” Rey tells him, reading a flash of disappointment cross his eyes as she tells him, “it’s one of my friends’ birthdays and we are having a thing tonight to celebrate.”
She doesn’t want him to think she’s avoiding him, or that, God forbid, she isn’t into him - she’s an adult human woman, after all, naturally she is into him - but, the truth is it’s Paige’s 30th birthday next weekend and this is the night Poe and Finn had already planned to host dinner at their place to celebrate her and get everyone tipsy.

“You’re a good friend,” he tells her appreciatively, sitting back down.

“Make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold’,’” she rattles off before she can stop herself.
It’s her oldest stand-by, reaching for a handy one-liner to deflect a compliment but, it embarrasses
her in moments like these when she feels the false sentiment it lends.

“I’m sorry,” she quickly adds, blushing to her core to have spit out a stupid old adage at him instead of something authentic.

“That’s a good one,” he quips, “‘make new friends’…” he trails off, repeating the phrase, “which is silver and which is gold?”

“Oh, I…it’s just a silly saying,” she says, trying to laugh it off.

“You up for adding a new friend?” he asks her, catching her eye as she looks up from the floor where she’s been trying to bury her shame over repeating old mottos.

“Wait, what? Are you…are you asking me to be...friends?” a little confused, she uses her trusty technique of answering a question with her own this time.

_He can’t be suggesting we become friends? _she thinks. _I’m misunderstanding._

“If you’re willing to let me tag along tonight?” he lobs back to her.

She smiles.

_Oh my freaking God, _she thinks, _this is happening._

“Uh. Okay,” she tells him, a wide grin on her face, all other words eluding her, then adding, “but, why?”

_Doesn’t he have a million famous friends? Why does he want to hang with me and my circle of weirdos? _she wonders.

“You’re a good egg, too, Rey” he tells her.

_Okay, I’m toast, _she thinks, _the man says my name and I want to do a panty-drop right here. Fuck._

“Can I text you?” he asks.

“Um, yeah,” she tells him, taking his phone from his hand as he unlocks it, entering her number.

_I’m entering my phone number in Ben Solo’s phone, _she screams internally at herself as she hands it back to him, feverish at his proximity, hands shaky and knees trembling.

“I’ll give you a shout,” he assures her and nods. He’s settled onto the couch casually again, a
professional preparing to re-engage his movie set actor routine, whatever that looks like, Rey knows.

“I’ll use my fancy new phone to shout back,” Rey tells him as she opens the trailer door.

She steadies herself as she climbs down, refusing to look away from the creaking stairs as she descends, carefully navigating so she doesn’t fall on her ass. Mercifully, Malaak the bodyguard angel isn’t at the base of the steps and she is a handful of steps away before she realizes she never said goodbye to Ben Solo before she closed the door to his trailer behind her.

She can’t decide if that’s good or bad.

She pulls her phone out to text for an Uber and sees a text appear at the top of her screen.

From: (213)749-0022  
10:12 am  
This is me shouting at you.  
- Ben

Rey gasps a little and smiles as she walks, returning the text, never missing a step after immediately saving his name with a shocked face emoji beside it.

To: Ben  
From: Rey  
10:12 am  
This is me shouting back.  
- Rey

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Rey has spent the balance of the day contemplating whether to prepare her friends that Ben Solo, A-list celebrity actor is accompanying her to Paige’s birthday party at Finn and Poe’s that night but, she never quite decides definitively and as the day drags on she finally determines it’ll likely be a mega shit-show one way or another.

It’s six to one-half dozen of the other, she thinks, knowing both choices are equivalent.

Her friends are likely to lose their minds whether they find out Ben Solo is coming to dinner now or when she shows up with him but, at least this way she doesn’t have to spend the rest of the day held hostage answering a barrage of questions in a group text if she chooses to hold out.
**Besides, what if he bails?** No need to count those chickens before they’ve hatched.

To: Rose, Paige, Finn, Poe  
From: Rey  
2:00 pm  
bringing a friend to Paige’s party.  
Be there by 6.  
Everybody BE. COOL.

From: Finn - Ooooh, Reyrey’s got a FRAND, yo.  
From: Poe - question: is this a boy-type friend or a girl-type friend?  
From: Paige - the more the merrier, sweetie pie! Woot woot!  
From: Rose - Who? Tell tell tell tell tell. WAIT, it’s not a Hollywood actor we all know, is it?  
From: Rose - OMG, you are NOT going to keep us in suspense, are you?  
From: Rose - Reyrey, ARE YOU?!  
From: Rose - you are, aren’t you???  
From: Rose - RRREEEYYYYYYYY  
She answers none of their texts.

Ben, however, texts Rey around 3 pm, telling her he’s done shooting for the day and is heading back to the hotel and asking if she’ll swing by around 5:30.

Rey has spent the better part of the day trying hard to stay distracted, productive and calm on her valuable day off but, mostly she’s paced nervously, eaten Tostitos from the bag and folded laundry while watching Downton Abbey and glancing at the clock.

When she texts Ben back, forcing herself to convey serenity, a full five minutes after she gets his text, she tells him “sure thing” and adds a smiley face emoji which feels completely natural because she hasn’t been able to stop smiling like an idiot all day.

She takes a shower and starts from scratch, pulling her hair into a topknot bun again, adding a double string of acai seed necklaces under the collar of her white, button-down shirt.

She rolls the sleeves up to the elbow and pulls a floral cotton, knee-length skirt under the knot at her waist, the tiers of her colorful skirt allowing her the girly twirly-skirt freedom she revels in and steps into her Converse before stepping into the summer evening.

The air is warm and still, plenty of sunshine still present as she leaves her apartment, walks past The Resistance and heads to Ben’s hotel in the arts district, across the walking bridge over the Tennessee River. While she’s crossing the walking bridge, Ben texts her again.
To: Rey
From: Ben
5:16 pm
Hey friend, my idiot manager is tying me up.
I’m in Room 304. Mind heading up here?

Rey’s heart sinks, wondering if he’s trying to get out of the dinner plans. Is this a test? An invite? What if he’s a predator and she’ll be snagged at his room?

Actually, she thinks, *Ben Solo being a predator sounds incredibly enticing. Come to think of it, nothing sounds more appealing.*

Clearing her head she texts him back a measured response, trying to feel out his intentions before she gets her hopes too far up or down.

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick,* she warns herself.

To: Ben
From: Rey
5:17 pm
Friend, be there in a few.
Need to cancel this tonite? Or is it still ok to hang?

To her incredible and audible relief, his response is almost instantaneous.

To: Rey
From: Ben
5:18 pm
Just need to tolerate this and I’m out of here with you.

At 5:30 pm on the dot, Rey pulls open the heavy glass doors of the hotel and heads to the elevator for the third floor, following signs and ignoring the Front Desk staff who eyeball her suspiciously without a CREW name tag. Most of the movie people are staying here, she observes, and they’ve got to be monitoring at least a little for paparazzi and fans.

The elevator lets her off on the third floor and the hall is totally empty but, Rey can hear shouting as she approaches Ben’s room. Stopping at Room 304 she centers herself, draws all her resolve tightly around her like a shawl and breathes nourishingly.

*Wing everything: life, eyeliner, everything,* she thinks.
She knocks and hears a testy, unfamiliar voice screech, “come in, for God’s sake, come in.” Looking again at the number on the door, making sure this is the same number Ben had texted earlier, she opens the door and pokes her head around the corner.

Opening the door, Rey sees Ben Solo, looking resigned and bored, his elbows on his knees in a chair, surrounded by a tall blonde woman with a severe pixie cut and stilettos and an irate-looking redhead man who Rey immediately recognizes from the coffee shop. Ben draws his back to the chair, sitting up ramrod straight when he sees Rey, and smiles a little at her from across the room.

“Hey,” she gives a tiny wiggle of her fingers in a wave and she sees the blonde woman roll her eyes.

“Rey, this is my manager Armie Hux and my publicist, Gwen Phasma,” Ben introduces her but, neither moves to shake her hand or greet her.

“Hi,” she repeats, smiling brightly. Both the manager and the publicist look her over and back to Ben without speaking.

“We’re almost done here,” Ben says, still seated, “make yourself comfortable,” he finishes, motioning to the couch near the entrance Rey is standing in. This must be a suite, there are couches and chairs spread out, and she sits politely in the nearest one.

Feeling her phone buzz, Rey reaches into her bag and pulls it out to see it’s a text from Ben. Ben who is sitting ten feet from her in the same room.
She looks up at him and he’s looking at her, and he has his own phone in his hand.
She looks back down at the phone.

From: Ben
To: Rey
5:33 pm
So sorry about this.

Rey types a response and hears it deliver a buzz to Ben’s phone a moment later.

To: Ben
From: Rey
5:34 pm
No worries, it happens. Need me to scram?

Ben: Do people still say “scram”?

Rey: Maybe? This people does.

Ben: Well, don’t do it - no scramming. I want out of here, too. They’re just talking schedule and the logistics may kill me.
Rey: I can create a diversion and you can escape. Helpful?

Ben: No good. Would prefer to escape with you. You know the destination, after all.

Rey: Hmm. Well, you’re stuck, friend. Sucks to be you.

Ben: Thank you for the sympathy. UGH, they’re going to be the death of me.

Rey: Are you always this dramatic? Is this an actor thing?

Ben: Are you always this cute? Is this a Tennessee thing?

Rey blushes and looks up and Ben, steals a smile towards him as he smiles back, something dark and sweet in his eyes like hot chocolate and when she looks back down at her phone she can’t think of how to respond, flustered.

That’s it. We’re out of here, I’m over it, he texts her, putting his phone in his back jeans pocket, standing and cracking his knuckles against one another, his hands laced inside out.

“Hux, I’m out of here. Seriously. You two have this under control. Just tell me where to be tomorrow and what time and I’ll be there,” he says to the man beside him adding to Rey, “you ready?”

Hux turns to Rey and eyes her thoughtfully. “I know who you are,” he says with a look of mild disdain that turns to interest, “you’re that girl from the coffee shop the other day.”

He turns Rey’s direction and she manually schools her face to keep from showing disgust at his manner.

“I still owe you a quarter,” Hux tells Rey, a smarmy smile emerging.

“Tell you what,” Rey says, standing and smoothing her skirt, “we’re gonna go,” she motions to herself and Ben, “and you can keep your quarter and we’ll call it even.”

Rey is smiling at Hux, the smile of a cynic, a wizened woman, a smart cookie. Phasma snorts softly, apparently enjoying seeing the interaction and Ben smirks openly.

“Nice to meet you,” Rey tells both the new acquaintances and turns to quickly bolt into the hallway, not waiting another second for her escape and barely starts for the elevator when she sees Ben come up behind her. When the door closes with a reverberating thud, Ben is walking beside her already and he shoves his hands into his pockets while shaking his head and smiling at her.

“How the hell did you get Hux to owe you money?” he asks, pushing the button for the elevator.

“Oh, he was being extra charming at the coffee shop, I made up the difference in his bill,” she dismissed it.

It was only a quarter, after all, and she wanted as much distance from the unpleasantness of how Phasma and Hux had looked at her as possible.

Rey doesn’t miss it when Ben leads her onto the elevator with his hand at the small of her back,
and she simultaneously takes in his broad frame dressed in a navy button-down with sleeves rolled up, like her own shirt, situated above jeans that make his ass look absolutely illegal.

She grants herself permission to think they look compatible in some small way, and still maintains the wherewithal to pull him by the wrist the opposite direction when he steps off the elevator and heads for the hotel’s front door.

“This way,” she tells him, conspiratorially.

Finn and Poe live three blocks behind the hotel on this side of the bridge, and Rey knows this hotel just as she knows most of this neighborhood so, she leads him to the fire exit and risks tripping the alarm which doesn’t sound at all.

Free and clear, she lets go of Ben’s wrist and starts the trek up the steep hill towards Finn and Poe’s beside Ben who has no trouble keeping up with his long stride.

“You grow up here?” Ben asks her as they walk uphill.

“Mostly,” Rey says, mindful of how she wants to deliver this information. “I bounced around a lot, foster homes, that sort of thing but, yeah, mostly.”

*Honesty is the best policy,* Rey remembers and she abides it but, just this *once* she wishes she could tell the super hot movie star she had a nice, normal, nuclear family of origin with a nice, normal backstory.

“Hmm,” Ben responds thoughtfully, “it’s beautiful here. This is a great town.”

“‘Home is where the heart is’,” she can’t even stop herself, she’s just uncomfortable enough with how deeply she’s attracted to this man and how shamed she is by her trauma story, she just reaches for the closest proverb and launches it at him.

“‘Home is wherever I’m with you’,” he catches it and tosses it back to her.

“‘Home is wherever I’m with you’,” she supplies, correcting herself with a blush on her cheeks, “they say.”

Rey trips on a root pushing through the concrete sidewalk as she steals a glance up at him, mumbling a slight “*oof*”, and Ben reaches out to steady her, grabs her hand and pulls her alongside him, righting her. She waits for him to drop her hand but, he just smiles at her a little as they walk, his hand wrapped around hers.

Rey’s heart squeezes so violently in her chest she nearly tumbles backward and whites out.

*I’m holding hands with him, I’m holding hands with him,* she interprets for herself.

“This ok?” he asks, lacing his fingers with hers, still pulling her along up the hill.
Oh my God, proposing would be ok, are you fucking kidding me? she thinks.

“Sure. We’re friends, right?” she sends a question back, smiling back at him, wondering if he’s holding her hand as a helper, a friend, or a potential conquest. She thinks about how he’s a big-time Hollywood actor who likely goes to bed with a woman in every town, maybe a dozen women in every town, and her heart sinks a little.


“Or platinum, in the case of rich and famous movie stars,” she teases him.

“Oh please,” he rolls his eyes with a shrug, “all that fame shit is worthless. It’s pretend. Imaginary. I am a normal person with a weird ass job.”

“Is that what you tell all the girls?” she’s sort of harassing him but, this is actually the question niggling the back of her mind and she’d love an answer.

Ben stops walking and turns to face her. “Is that what you think this is?”

Rey feels a blush of shame creep into her cheeks. She knits her brow together and it’s her turn to shrug now, disarmed and unable to be coherent let alone cute.

“I mean…c’mon. ‘Normal people’ don’t have bodyguards who look like The Rock. You’re a powerful movie star. You travel the world. I’m a nobody with no family from a small town,” she tells him, explaining.

“Rey, you’re not nobody. Not to me,” he tells her, squeezing her fingers gently in his hand, standing still facing her.

His gaze is so potent, so laced with sincerity Rey is forced to avert her eyes after a moment and look at the cement. She licks her lips and studies the cracks in the broken sidewalk, studying the roots pushing through all around the broken ground under her feet and feels Ben pull her along, beginning their ascent again.

“So who’s going to be at this party tonight?” he asks her, as they walk further. “So I’m prepared.”

“All my best friends,” Rey tells him, happy for the change of conversation to something simpler.

“A lot of them?” he asks, making Rey conscious he may prefer larger gatherings than she knows this one to be.

“Just a few…is that ok?” she asks, tentatively.
“Honestly, that’s ideal but, my goal was really to be with you tonight, anyhow,” he tells her, looking straight ahead as they march up the hill.

“It’s this townhouse up here, on the left,” Rey directs him, changing the subject, nodding to the two-story beside them, centering the row of homes they’ve passed on the hill.

Approaching the house, Rey realizes they’re still holding hands and she bites her bottom lip while squeezing his hand once before removing her fingers from his to knock.

Ben stands tall beside her, his eyes glancing at her from the side, his hand moving to her lower back. She takes the moment to look up fully at him, absorbing this moment - tucking it away eternally in her memory, this precious fleeting breath of time - and drinks it all in.

_Sweet Mother of Pete, why does he have to be so gorgeous?_ she wonders.

“Ready?” Rey asks him, the door opening before he can reply.

“Oh my God, no way,” Finn sputters, holding a fist to his mouth and laughing around it, he shouts to the others already in the house behind him, “she’s here, you guys,” before turning back to Rey and Ben and giving one loud, head-tossed-backward guffaw to the sky says, “how you doin’, man?,” offering Ben a handshake.

“Good, good. Thanks for having me,” Ben tells him, shaking his hand.

“Girrrlllll,” Finn purrs, shaking his head, still laughing, “they’re gonna shit a brick,” he tells Rey, pulling her in for a hug.

Rey smiles up at Ben and grabs for his wrist firmly, squeezing one final time in reassurance before stepping over the threshold into the house with him at her back. He winks back at her and her heart dissolves in a flurry of butterflies taking off.

Poe marches up with two open beer bottles in his hands, behind Finn and freezes, wide-eyed.

“Holy shit,” he says looking at Ben, “you’re him,” he says, wide-eyed. “Here,” Poe finishes, handing them each a beer and giving a chuckle.

“Thanks,” Ben says smiling shyly, taking the beer, “thanks for having me.”

“Yeah. Welcome, welcome,” he says, pulling them inside and kissing Rey on the cheek.

Rey and Ben continue through the foyer with Finn and Poe each taking a sip of beer and Paige comes stumbling towards them, bright-eyed and flushed, wearing a paper tiara with a big, pink “30” in the center and an oversized wine glass in her hand, already celebrating.

“Reyrey! You’re here! And it’s my birthday!” she cries, throwing her arms around Rey, sloshing her white wine as she jumps up and down a little.
“I know, I know! Happy birthday, Pager!,” Rey beams at her, hugging and holding on tightly for dear life as her friend tugs her side to side excitedly.

“Oh my God, you’re beautiful!” Paige announces, her eyes landing on Ben as she stares unashamedly at him, cornering him in his personal space, grinning like a loon up at him. “Reyrey, he’s beautiful!” she repeats, looking back at Rey, cornering her instead.

“Oh my God, you’re so wasted already,” Rey laughs, pulling her friend by the shoulders away from where she has Ben cornered.

Entering the kitchen with Ben behind her and Paige still under her firmly directing hands, Rey approaches Rose with a laser-focused look that transmits the message Be Cool, Help Me in the silent language shared between life-long best friends, begging Rose to help moderate the initial freak-out shared by all their friends since Ben’s arrival.

Rose steps up to Rey and hugging her says, “sorry, we’ve been drinking basically all day,” standing between Ben and Rey she tells them both, “we started with birthday mimosas at breakfast and then had birthday margaritas at lunch and we started on birthday wine with dinner a while ago already.”

“She is the birthday girl,” Ben says kindly, smiling down at Rose.

“She is indeed,” Rose affirms, sticking her hand out for a shake she tells Ben, “I’m Rose. And this is my boyfriend, Gun,” she waves him over and smiles proudly at Gun. Rey takes a minute to send a covert, knowing grin to her best friend, knowing this is the first time Rose has introduced him as such.

“Gun,” Ben nods, shaking the man’s offered hand, adding “Ben,” introducing himself. He looks down at Gun’s forearm tattoo, a rifle spanning the length of his arm, elbow to wrist above a Marine insignia and remarks, “you’re a devil dog?”


Ben rolls his right sleeve up near his shoulder and curls his arm, revealing a Marine insignia tattoo inscribed with “Semper Fidelis”, the Marine motto on his inner bicep as he flexes and Rey’s eyes widen in reaction.

“First Battalion, First Marines,” Ben responds, to which Gun reaches out and clasps his elbow with his huge hand, Ben mirroring him and Gun shouts the traditional “OORAH,” which Ben reiterates equally loudly. Rey and Rose chuckle, watching the male bonding and Rey decides to take a minute to escape to the kitchen with Rose.

“I’ll be right back,” Rey tells Ben, patting his forearm, smiling at the two men already discussing Marine life. Rey had forgotten how she’d known Ben’s history of military service but, seeing him embrace Gun she recalled reading he had enlisted after 9/11 and she feels her heart twist like a paper towel.

Good Lord. Hot, sweet, fucking patriotic. Sheesh, she thinks, feeling helplessly drawn to him.

“Holy hell, Rey Lowood, that’s effing Ben Solo out there!” Rose hisses at her in the safety of the kitchen.
Rey smiles and bites her tongue between her teeth, nose wrinkling, “I know! I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,” she confesses.

“He’s so cute, isn’t he?” Rose asks, “I mean, he’s no Gun, but, he’s alright,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“I feel like I can’t breathe around him,” Rey tells her, shaking her hands as if trying to free her hands of something invisible.

“Here,” Rose says, handing her a shot glass filled with something amber. “This will help,” she tells her, tossing an identical liquid back.

Rey downs two shots of whiskey and carries a huge ceramic bowl of pasta to the round table everyone is gathering around and sees Ben sitting already, still chatting with Gun beside him. She sits in the empty seat to his left and sees him smile at her in greeting, sitting back a little to put his arm around the back of her chair so as not to touch her skin directly.

The effect is the same for her though, and Rey feels her body lean into him automatically.

“Rey, here, Peanut,” Finn gets her attention as he hands her a separate bowl of pasta from the family-style oversized bowl in the table’s center. The conversation bubbles around them as everyone fills plates and Ben asks, “are you a vegetarian?” realizing she is being served something different.

“No, she’s allergic to shellfish,” Finn tells Ben, interrupting, “and this shrimp will make her bloat like a blowfish.”

“Awesome Finn, thanks for that,” Rey answers, reddening.

“Hey, I’m just trying to keep you alive,” he smirks at her, holding his hands up defensively.

“Yeah, one bite of shrimp and Rey will have a one-way ticket to the ER tonight,” Poe pipes up.

“Oh! Oh! Remember that time in sixth grade in Mr. Pineos’s home ec class when you tasted that lobster bisque and you turned bright pink and puked in the hallway?” Rose joins in, unable to keep herself from contributing.

“Oh my God,” Rey groans, her face in her hands. Ben looks around amusedly, and reaches for the bowl Rey is scooping pasta from when she’s done, serving himself from that one, too.

“Can’t be too careful,” he says to her quietly, with a wink at Rey beside him. The eye contact between them is electric and Rey could use another shot of whiskey to stay balanced with all the heat he’s emanating.

“So, what did you do today, Birthday Girl?” Poe asks Paige, whose crown has slipped askew but, keeps chomping her pasta and lemon butter shrimp and wine down happily, content to be queen of the evening.
“We had mani pedis and Starbucks,” Paige rattles off, “and then we had to stop by Gun’s work so Rosie could see her man at lunchtime,” she says, pointedly looking at her little sister, who grins at her boyfriend, “and then we went shopping for new shoes and I got a fantastic pair of heels and then I went home and took a fucking nap because it’s my birthday and I wanted to and it was glorious.”

“What is it you do now, Gun?” Ben asks.

“I’ve been a sheriff’s deputy since I got back from tour overseas last year,” he says, “got a cruiser and normally work the other side of town, out east,” he explains, “just got lucky today and stayed downtown, got to see my girl on the fly.”

Gun ruffles the back of Rose’s neck and they gaze at one another adorably for a minute in a way that makes Rey’s chest turn over.

“What do you do now, man?” Gun asks Ben, taking a swig of beer, everyone else leaning in to listen.

Gun hasn’t lived anywhere state-side for most years of his adulthood and it’s unlikely he’s never heard of Kylo Ren but, he obviously hasn’t been clued in on the situation and it’s amusing to watch this unfold.

Rey holds her breath a little.

“Uh, well,” Ben begins, “I’m an actor.”

“Is that right? Awesome, man. Like on TV, or…?” Gun asks, everyone listening closely.

“Uh, yeah, some TV,” Ben explains, clearing his throat, “and some films.”

“No shit? Wonder if I’ve seen any of them,” Gun says, “That’s cool man, that’s cool. Not much pay in being a starving artist though or so I hear, am I right? How much you make on your last gig?”

*You could definitely hear a pin drop right now, Rey thinks.*

“‘Bout two million,” Ben answers. He lifts his beer to his lips and takes a sip, starting at the ceiling.

After a beat of silence, the entire table erupts in gales of laughter, Ben joining in once he realizes the tension has broken and he looks to see Rey wiping tears from her eyes in a fit of giggles. Gun slaps him on the back shouting, “aw, man, that’s fucking awesome” and everyone has trouble regaining composure adequately the balance of the meal, hysterics generally reigning supreme.
After dinner, Paige orders the coffee table removed so there’s space for dancing and she hooks up her phone to the speaker system in the living room, Beyonce and Rhianna taking turns singing to the small crowd. Rose finishes clearing the table and Ben and Gun stand to help her, Ben smiling as he watches Rey and her friends slide around being silly in the small space, singing along boisterously.

“I could get used to this if this is what it means to cook for a couple of Marines,” Rose says in wonder, appreciating the kitchen help the two men offer.

“Yes ma’am,” Gun says, reaching from behind her to wrap his arms around her waist, “if that means you’ll fix me something delicious every night,” he adds, suggestively.

“How long have you two been together?” Ben gestures to them since they are in no hurry to part and have no shame in cuddling unabashedly.

“Long enough to know,” Gun says, smacking Rose’s ass playfully before leaving the kitchen again.

Rose sighs audibly and gazes after her boyfriend wistfully as he walks away. “So,” she begins, addressing Ben as she rinses dishes, “how long you in town for, do you know?”

“Couple more days,” Ben says, his attention being drawn to Rey, visible through the doorway. He can see her doing “the swim” with Poe, dancing like a sexy goofball, free and beautiful, and he wants to go be with her.

“And then you’re outta here,” Rose finishes for him, assuming his plan. She isn’t being unkind but, this is Rey they’re talking about here and this is serious business to Rose, she wants that known.

“Yeah, I think so,” Ben says.

He hasn’t considered anything beyond this evening since he spotted Rey at the shoot this morning and it hurts his head a little to have to consciously admit to himself his time in Chattanooga is limited.

“Ya know, it’s been a while since Rey brought a guy around,” Rose tells Ben. “Quite a while,” she emphasizes.

“Yeah?” Ben asks, wondering how that could be true, how she wasn't being fucking chased by a dozen dudes, watching Rey dancing with Finn, twirling her skirt above her beat up Converse.

*Why is that combination so fucking mesmerizing? How is this girl so damn adorable?* he wonders.
“Yeah, really,” Rose promises him. She turns to Ben and turns off the water.

“Ya know, Rey has been my best friend since we were in fourth grade. And she’s…precious. Not like, fragile but, like important. To a lot of people.”

Ben sees Rey take off her loops of beads and set them on the table beside the couch, fanning her flushed face, red from the excitement of drinking and dancing, he guesses.

“I can see her being important,” he agrees with Rose, moving aside to let Finn enter the kitchen.

Ben makes his way to the couch and sits beside Gun, amusedly watching Poe swing Paige and Rey around like a pair of rag dolls as the song finishes.

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Rey is out of breath and sort of sweaty when the song finishes, and Finn hands her a shot of Fireball.

Ben is seated on the couch, his knees spread and he looks good enough to eat.

_rey is out of breath and sort of sweaty when the song finishes, and Finn hands her a shot of Fireball._

How many times will I get this opportunity? she thinks. _YOLO, baby, you only live once,_ she tells herself as she approaches him and takes a seat on his left thigh.

Maybe it’s the alcohol or maybe it’s the way she feels drunk on Ben Solo but, Rey tips the shot back and wraps her arm around Ben’s massive shoulders as she feels his arm wrap around her, her ass against the crook of his elbow behind her, his hand cupping the outer edge of her thigh. She tugs him just slightly closer and steals a look at his face, even better looking up close, and feels him squeeze her leg gently through her skirt, his huge hand hot and heavy, and she feels herself purr and tighten in response.

Rey barely hears the rest of the conversation around her, her head filled with blood and whiskey, her veins filled with Ben’s deliciously overpowering scent, all masculine and woody-spicy, and her belly full of pasta and laughter.

When Paige blows out the candles on her cheesecake, making wishes she proceeds to insist on telling everyone that include a pet pot-bellied pig, a cruise to the Bahamas and some good head, making everyone howl with laughter and cheer, and Finn hands out slices of cake, Rey is still
balanced on Ben’s lap, laughing, feeling better than she can remember in any recent times.

She tracks Ben’s hand as it moves slowly from her thigh to her ass and gently squeezes her cheek experimentally and returns to her thigh and before she takes a bite of her cheesecake she offers him a bite and when he moves towards her, she slips her fork in between his goddamn beautiful lips and feeds it to him, his eyes on hers the whole time.

If she hadn’t melted down and endured a nuclear reaction before, this was the moment it happened.

*NASA, Rey thought, we have liftoff.*

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Ben's POV, chapter 1 of "True North", companion to "The North Shore", drops Sunday afternoon.
Come get Ben's side of the story <3
xoxo
Chapter 4

Rarity

“Such a rarity it is to find someone with a heart as big as their mind.”
“Here you go, Pager,” Rey said, handing her friend a thick, sparkly ivory envelope, “one dollar’s worth for every year of your life.”

Paige ripped open the envelope unceremoniously and pulled out a neatly inscribed gift certificate for a massage at her favorite salon and hugged Rey around the neck, crooning her thanks exaggeratedly, a result of both her day’s worth of partying and her enthusiasm for massages.

“Next week, I’ve got a date with a set of magic hands,” she sang, holding the gift card to her chest with eyes closed and head tilted to the ceiling.

“Here’s mine, here’s mine,” Finn said, handing her a bottle of wine and a complete set of the original Twin Peaks series on DVD.

Poe’s gift was a gift card to Maz’s Mug, Rose’s was a hand-chosen outfit complete with dress, shoes, jewelry, and a bottle of nail polish and Gun brought her a bouquet of sunflowers.

Only Ben was empty-handed, and Rey felt him stiffen a little beside her as he apologized to Paige, though no one could blame him for being unprepared.

“I’ll get you next year,” he teased, cringing purposely, “sorry.”

“Are you kidding?” Paige exclaimed, “Kylo Ren came to my 30th birthday party! Best gift ever!” she told him, standing on tiptoes to hug him goodbye at the door.

“Thanks again for coming, Reyrey,” Paige told her, with a squeeze where Rey stood beside Ben.

“Come on, I wouldn’t miss this for the world, you know that,” Rey smiled at her, feeling Ben lace her fingers in his as they said their goodbyes to her friends. Her heart skipped a beat but, she didn’t look up at him yet, sending him a silent signal this felt natural and good.

“Here,” Poe whispered in her ear as he leaned to kiss Rey’s cheek goodbye. He concealed a condom in his palm and surreptitiously slipped it into Rey’s unoccupied hand and pulled away before she could say a word.
“You are going to bang him, right?” Finn hissed into her ear while he hugged her, less privately than his boyfriend had communicated with her, causing her to giggle and she pulled away to look him in the eye before telling him in her normal tone of voice, “duh.”

Rose and Gun held hands mirroring Ben and Rey and Rey blew a kiss as they stepped over the threshold, leaving her friends behind, hearing them explode into fits of giggles as soon as the door was securely closed and the night air closed around them again.

They both exhaled hard, looked at one another and shook off leftover tension.

The night had been a tremendous success in Rey’s opinion, her friends predictably absurd but, inviting and inclusive as she knew they would be, but, it was still tiring being a conduit and interpreter all evening long between them and Ben.

She welcomed the night air as it freshened her overheated body and mind, grateful to have the steep hill to focus on descending carefully instead of navigating conversation.

“That was amazing,” Ben told her.

“Yeah? You liked them?” she asked, grinning widely.

“They’re fantastic,” he told her with a hearty nod, “really, Rey, you have some great people.”

“I do. It’s true,” she agreed proudly. She was comfortable bragging about this and she is enjoying it immensely. “Are they like your friends back home?”

“Uh, no,” Ben replied, his tone both mildly amused and bitter. “I don’t really have a home per se, and I certainly don’t have a wealth of interesting, good-hearted friends like that back there,” he told her, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder to Finn and Poe’s. “What you have with your friends there is a rarity.”

“Really?” Rey didn’t know how to make sense of this.

Ben Solo was rich, famous, desirable, basically chased within an inch of his life by paparazzi and fans every day, stalked by a woman now in jail, she remembered reading in a celebrity magazine once. How could he not have friends at least as amazing as hers?

“I would think you have the pick of the litter when it comes to people you surround yourself with,”
she told him as he looked straight ahead. She studied his profile, regal and captivating, again wondering what she’d done to win the lottery and be the woman walking around Chattanooga, holding his hand but, he just stared straight ahead, fixedly.

“Ah, no. Hell no,” he says with a shake of his head resolutely. “What I get are playdates arranged for me by Phasma and Hux like I’m a toddler, or crazed fans who think I’m my alter ego or someone who wants to get close to my family. What I do not have is a bunch of people to be ridiculous with who will move heaven and earth to celebrate my birthday with me.”

Rey just looks up at him to read his face as he walks and shares, sensing the sadness behind his words, holding the space quietly in case he wants to continue.

“I can’t remember the last time someone invited me to something like Paige’s party,” he says, melancholy tinging his voice, “you’re lucky after all, aren’t you?”

Feeling sympathy for him and letting it bolster her courage, Rey tells him, “I’m lucky to be with you tonight,” which makes him smile brightly at her so she goes on, “what do you mean you don’t have a home, ‘per se’?”

Ben sighs, “I mean, I have a place in L.A., but, it’s more ‘crash pad’, than something that feels ‘homey’. I grew up splitting time between New York and California, back and forth so much with my parents, I couldn’t ever decide where I fit. Bi-coastal is more exhausting and less glamorous than it sounds, especially when you’re seven. And, my mom and dad have so many houses between the two of them, I never even know where to find them when I want to visit one of them. I have to track down their assistants first and see whether they’re fighting or whether they’re living together or whatever. Certainly doesn’t feel like going ‘home’ when I visit them.”

Rey, like everyone else, knew the epic love story of Han Solo and Leia Organa, or at least she knew the E! True Hollywood Story version. She knew they’d fallen in love on the set of Galactic Battles and made the trilogy together, marrying and divorcing twice in the 70’s and 80’s while they raised their only son, and continued to work in the movie industry currently, still routinely photographed as a couple, neither able to leave one another’s orbit for very long, it seemed.

Apparantly, the actual experience of being raised by a couple living in such circumstances was less attractive than the TV version.

“Ben...” Rey coos at him, her heart a little wounded at his story.
He slows and turns to her gently, “I’ve been waiting for you to say that all night,” he tells her, which makes her smile in spite of herself.

*Is he playing me?* she wonders. *Is this the sob story he tells all the girls to get into their panties?*

“‘Friends are the family you choose for yourself’,” she recites for him, walking again.

Ben pulls their linked hands behind himself, depositing her hand at his far hip, winding his own hand around her, fingers grazing her ribs, her body tight under his armpit as they walk, side by side in step with one another and Rey feels strengthened by his nearness and vulnerability.

“I had one uncle, my uncle John, who was set to adopt me and then he died. My parents were long gone and I moved from foster home to foster home, all over Tennessee. He was the only one who really ever wanted me and then he died. He left me the building Finn and I set up Resistance in, and a little money but, what I really wanted was for the state to have pushed my case through in time to have let him adopt me. And it just didn’t happen. ‘Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be’, I guess. But, in the end, I learned you go out and find your own people and that’s why I have Rose and Poe and Finn and Paige and now Gun too, I guess. And you can be my friend, too,” she tells him, looking up at his face openly.

“Thank you, Rey, really,” he says, but his feet stop as they’ve reached the bottom of the hill and he moves till he’s facing Rey, directly in front of her, “but, I think I’ve changed my mind,” he tells her. “I don’t think I just want to be your friend.”

“You don’t?” Rey feels like her body has turned into silly putty and her brain turned to congealed oatmeal.

Ben threads their hands together again, pulls both her hands behind him and leaves them at his back, winding his own around her waist until they are nose-to-nose, the slight elevation of the hill behind her giving Rey a couple bonus inches of height.

“Friends may be too highly overrated,” he tells her, kissing her lightly on the tip of her nose.

“‘They are?’ she asks, dumbly thinking *he kissed me, he kissed me.*

Alarm bells ring in her head, *alert! alert! this is a tactic to get you into bed!* Rey silences them. *I*
“Yeah, I think so,” he tells her. “What I want more than that is to fucking mess your hair up and hear you say my name again.”

He kisses her neck gently, over and over, burying his face in the hollow between her shoulder and her chin, pushing her collar away with his face, a move that makes Rey whimper out loud at the sensation he’s essentially undressing her.

“Ben…” she breathes. She is helpless to not only obey him but, also to say the only thing she can functionally form.

He groans into her neck. “Yeah, like that, but I want to hear you whisper it and scream it and say it in your sleep.”

Rey’s head lolls back and she’d die right away, just disapparate like in the Harry Potter movies, dissolve and float up into the summer sky and disappear if she didn’t also desperately want to see where this was heading.

“Oh my God,” she whispers.

Ben pulls her into place with his hand at the back of her head and kisses her soundly on the lips, covering and consuming her mouth so beautifully, caressing her cheekbone with his thumb, her tongue with his own, her arms welcomed to run up his strong back, and it dislodges her thoughts from her mind and makes her fears, her worries, her doubts float away like a lost balloon.

He kisses her like he’s thirsty and she’s a waterfall, like he’s dying and she’s a cure, like this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and Rey believes it to be so, and she kisses him back with all the ardor she’s felt since she bumped into him in front of her shop on Saturday and she loses track of time.

His tongue is in her mouth, his groans are down her throat, his hands are everywhere and nowhere near close enough and Rey is losing her mind wanting him naked in a bed where she can devour him correctly and thoroughly.

She is the kind of hot for Ben Solo that makes women crazed, makes them rip their clothes off,
makes them wake up to stupid decisions and repercussions and consequences.

None of which could possibly matter less to Rey right now if you paid her a billion dollars.

“I want you to come upstairs,” he tells her, pulling his head back and cradling her head steady in both his palms while he looks into Rey’s eyes, searching. “Will you?”

Rey nods. “God, yes,” leaning forward to kiss him again, wrapping her arms around his neck, pressing herself as far into him as possible on a sidewalk.

He smells so goddamn heavenly, and his arms are so incredibly strong and she’s lost in how perfectly he is holding her captive, caged by his big body like this.

She’s all kinds of malleable and agreeable, and there’s nothing she wants more on earth right now than for Ben Solo to crush her to death with his magnificent body and hurt her and bring her to climax and use her up so she can see him lose control above her, an inch from her face.

“I’m going to go upstairs and make sure Hux and Phasma are gone. Will you follow me in five minutes?” he asks, spelling out a plan.

Suddenly, Rey panics, feeling him release her slowly and she blurts out, “Ben,” pulling him back by fistfuls of his shirt. “Are you asking me to have sex with you?”

Rey is worried all of a sudden she has misconstrued and she’ll arrive upstairs in five minutes tightly wound and expecting to have sex with Ben Solo and he’ll look at her like she’s a crazy person, laugh at her, tell her she imagined it all.

“Rey,” he says, kissing her soundly, his massive hands cupping her jaw, his fingers threaded into the hair at her nape, his huge shoulders tightly packed into himself, his eyes studying hers, “I am asking you to let me make you come twice.” He kisses her again. “Once with my mouth so I can taste you.” Another kiss, with tongue this time, slow and deep and excruciating. “And once around my cock because I am crazy hot for you, beautiful.” Another kiss, hot and aching and tugging and intense.

“Oh my God,” Rey moans again, kissing him back. “Yes, Ben, please.”

No one has ever kissed her this way before, she's never been held or touched or electrified or come anywhere remotely close to being kissed like this before.
It's like her whole body is a lightning storm, flashes firing from her fingertips where they run the length of Ben's cotton shirt up his biceps to his shoulder blades, and down his back to the dip of his spine into his belt loops. She feels it in his hand tracing fire from the edge of her ears, brushed by his hands as they caress her cheeks, her head, her chin, her lips when he moves between kisses to stroke her lips with his thumbs, planning his next move as he stares at them, his kisses too intense, too delicious, too innumerable to measure, his intent so sincere and his frame so incredible she is lost, lost, lost, spinning, floating, falling even while standing still in his arms on a sidewalk.

It's like she was built for this, like the universe makes sense, like every crazy, sad, beautiful thing that's brought her to this moment has been for something and she's the luckiest girl on Earth not because he's a box office hit but, because he's looking at her like she's a wonder, like he feels lucky, too, like he wants her as she wants him, like he can't stop kissing her, either, and it's the single most miraculous thing she's ever known.

“Five minutes,” he assures her, pulling her back for one last kiss once, twice, three times, four, until Rey smiles and playfully smacks his chest. “Go!”

He winks at her one last time, threads his hand through his hair as he strides away from her to the hotel front door, too far from her in a heartbeat, and Rey sighs, smiling down at herself to see she has twisted her hands into a laced pretzel of her own fingers pressed tightly to her chest, watching him go, biting her bottom lip in bliss and anticipation, ready to abandon it all to the man who swept her into this tidal wave of desire.

*****

There are movies and love songs that offer renditions of what Rey is living tonight with Ben Solo but, they are cheap imitations of what she is feeling.

Never before could a woman have been made to feel this way, like she’s fashioned purely of feathers and beauty, light as a moonbeam, ravenous as a lioness, powerful as a hurricane.

Rey could skip like a deer and dance like a prima ballerina and sing like an angel knowing in just a minute she will be in Ben’s arms and she can throw caution to the wind.

Tomorrow, maybe he’d be Kylo Ren on set again, and Ben Solo the movie star to everyone else but, tonight he’d been crystal clear he was really the real Ben and he was all hers.

She’s never been so thankful she had the good forethought to wear lacy panties and a flimsy bra, never been so ready to strip provocatively and act as wanton as she can imagine.

Basically, nothing is off limits in her mind tonight.
She wants this man like she’s never fucking wanted a man before ever, and she’s going to get hers.

Her mind is racing as she takes the elevator to the third floor, a happy song buzzing her brain she can’t be troubled to place, and she considers pulling her hair down from the bun - he’d mentioned wanting to mess up her hair and his words had made her brain buzz - but, she decides to leave it in place, hoping he’ll be true to his own desires and she can watch his face as he tugs it free himself.

She wants that man unleashed and she wants to be there to enjoy it.

She pushes every single proverb and adage and platitude out of her head, wipes her brain clean and knocks on the door to room 304.

Ben opens the door swiftly to find Rey standing, a smile on her lips but, her eyes darken and her brow knits as soon as she sees his face. He’s positively ashen, the joy drained clean away, his hands running through his hair in frustration, his dark eyes clouded with anger and confusion.

Rey feels a stampede of negativity threatening to overrun her and her eyes widen as her smile fades.

“Baby, is that housekeeping?” she hears a feminine voice from an adjoining room behind Ben, and sees a woman sweep into the room, approaching his back.

Immediately, Rey knows this to be Jennifer Allison, recent Oscar-winning actress, perpetual Hollywood It girl, beauty icon and one-time girlfriend of Ben Solo.

She’s the kind of beautiful that isn’t botoxed, isn’t retouched, she’s just legit gorgeous in any clothing, on any screen, with any hair color and Rey feels her spirit fold itself into a tiny origami bird and fly away.

“Can you tell me if there’s a decent gym around here?” the woman asks Rey, draping her body over Ben’s from behind him, his broad chest partially covering her silken, barely-covered body, boasting only a negligee and long, flowing hair around her shoulders. Rey remembers her dirty Converse, her tightly-tied hair, her forgotten string of acai seeds and feels young, ugly, ridiculous.

“Uh, y-yes,” Rey stutters, “the Sports Barn is nearby,” she tells her, remembering what the actress has asked.
Rey can’t look at Ben. She physically cannot look him in the eye.

He is frozen to the spot, still holding the door open with Jennifer Allison around his shoulders and waist like she owns him and meanwhile Rey’s soul is being shredded, diminishing every second she stands here and all she wants is to disappear as fast a possible.

Her brain is screaming at her to run, get away, hide but, everything is happening both so fast and so slow and she’s still catching up.

“Good! Thank God! The one downstairs is shit,” the actress announces, removing herself from Ben’s body and slapping him on the ass as she prances away, “I don’t want you getting flabby so everybody wonders why that Oscar-winning actress is still with that old, fat guy.”

As soon as the woman disappears around the corner, Rey takes off for the elevator in an actual speed walk.

She insists to herself she not run like she’d prefer but, holds her head high and maintains a sense of dignity as she walks, target heart rate or not.

“Rey, wait,” she hears Ben as the hotel room door slams behind him, one step behind her.

“God, I’m such a fucking idiot,” she hisses at herself, jamming the button for the elevator, chin lifted to watch the numbers as the car approaches.

“Please, Rey. Please, wait,” Ben implores, reaching for her, trying to get her to face him.

“Oh my God, Ben, this is not what I thought you meant when you said ‘let’s not be friends anymore’,” Rey huffs at him with false humor, angrily.

“Rey, please, this isn’t what I want. This isn’t what I meant. I didn’t even know she was going to be here, I don’t even know why she’s here…” he trails off when Rey flashes anger at him sideways through slit eyes, showering him with the full glare of her loathing at that statement.

“And that would have made it ok if she wasn’t?!?” she wonders aloud at him.

*Where is that fucking elevator?!* she screams internally, considering the stairs but, deciding he’ll
only follow her.

“No, no, Rey, please, listen to me, please. Let me explain, just please, let me figure this out, please just let me explain…” He’s asking her to concede, she knows, but she’s never felt more like a living pile of shit in her life, and she just has to get away from him for God’s sake.

“God, and I fell for the whole fucking thing, too. Hook, line and sinker,” she glowers at herself under her breath, utterly disgusted, waiting for the elevator, looking anywhere but at him. She can't look at him. If she looks at him she'll cry and she'll hate herself for crying, and she is all she left has so she cannot hate herself.

“Rey, listen to me, please, listen, Rey, she isn’t supposed to be here. We are over, we are supposed to be over. She isn’t supposed to be here, I don't want her here,” he tries to explain but, to no avail.

Rey is closed to him now, she has decided, and there’s no going back.

She is a wall, a stone, a concrete sidewalk and nothing will break through, no matter how hard the trees grow their roots up she will push them back down again.

“No. No. No,” she insists. “I'm the one who isn’t supposed to be here,” she tells him and thank God in heaven the elevator doors open and she steps on, pushing the lower level button and holding it depressed.

She hasn’t looked at him till now but, she gives herself one last gift, one last little thing and she looks up into his eyes.

Those beautiful, stupid, endless, imploring, captivating eyes.

She locks herself inside them for a heartbeat, just one last look before she leaves, one last, little flash to store away, one final beat of connection before she is alone again, left.

I was supposed to be seeing those eyes from much closer, she muses, her anger already dwindling, disappointment washing it away and replacing it with grief as the doors slide closed, the ancient hurt of being left alone swooping in, sweeping her up, catching her in its clutches, whispering of her pathetic curse of loneliness.

She will console herself in the moments and days to come that the last thing he said as the doors slid shut was her name, his voice breaking a little, the last look in his eyes one of mirrored disappointment, the last thing he did was give a heavy sigh, bringing both hands to run through his
hair as she disappeared downstairs for good.

She wasn’t even to the bottom of the elevator ride to the ground floor and she was already weeping, her heart split and the same song still looping through her head.

“Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be.”

It’s Doris Day’s voice in her head, Rey remembers immediately, the fog lifting, granting her clarity about this weird little detail all of a sudden, the song she was humming happily, waiting downstairs those precious five minutes till she was going to be in Ben’s arms again.

“When I was young, I fell in love
I asked my sweetheart what lies ahead
Will we have rainbows, day after day
Here’s what my sweetheart said.

Que, Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be
The future’s not ours to see
Que, Sera, Sera.”

Rey walked home alone across the bridge and pulled her own hair down from the knotted bun.

*****
Rain

Chapter Summary

beautiful mood board created by the amazing rileybabe, who hasn't even read this and
did a gorgeous job anyhow.
Thank you, friend!

...Chapter 6 - Friday afternoon <3
“and there were always those nights she preferred the rain over people. because the rain would remind her of how she should feel and people would remind her of the things she always wanted to forget.”

- r. m. drake
If the universe was merciful, Rey would have woken to a thunderstorm, dark and stormy as her heart.

She would have woken to a nor’easter or a hurricane or a snow day and it would have been welcomed, cocooning her from the outside world and offering a physical manifestation of her heart but, as it was, the only storm the next morning was a tsunami of humiliation and sadness that threatened to capsize her despite how unexpectedly Ben Solo had entered her life, the sky Tiffany blue with a smear of puffy white clouds and a perfect 80 degrees.

If the earth was on her side, Rey could get the last night’s events to stop running through her mind endlessly, she could move from the bed.

She would sit up and get a shower, grab a coffee and her keys, pick up the FedEx package on the front steps of Resistance that was likely to be laying there and open the store, turn the lights on and get the day started but, as it was, the sheer agony she had been forced to endure, the sickening amount of shame she was weighted down with of being compared to a real-life movie star actress and then rejected and disappointed leaves her too gutted to be able to get out of bed.

If this were a different world, and she still alone in it, still an orphan, Rey would suffer in silence in her home, solitary.

She would maybe get a cat or a dog or a fish and carry on conversations with them and the ladies of the Home Shopping Network in the middle of the night, tell them about the unbelievably good fortune she’d almost had to fall for the handsome man from California but, as it was, as fate would have it, luckily enough, she does have people and she knows enough to realize she needs them now - right this very minute and possibly for the rest of the day if not longer so, she sends out an S.O.S., she lights a flare, and she lays in bed awaiting reinforcements, staring at the ceiling, replaying it all.

To: Rose, Finn

7:04 am

I am home in bed.

I may never leave.

My heart is shattered.

I need you.

Please come.
Within an hour, Rose has unlocked the door to Rey’s apartment and silently crawled into bed beside Rey, holding her hand without speaking and Finn arrives ten minutes after that with coffees and a barrage of questions and when he sits down on the foot of the bed, Rey breaks a dam of tears and weeps aloud, retelling her two best friends since fourth grade about the night that broke her before it even began while they listen and prove to her again what family really is.

******

“Un-fucking-believable,” Finn said for the hundredth time as he walked around Rey’s apartment.

He had proven more audible in his reception of Rey’s story about the prior night but, Rose’s response is the one Rey can feel building the most tangibly.

Rose’s jaw is fixed and her gaze fierce as she listens to the progress of Rey’s retelling, her eyes alighting especially when Rey details Jennifer Allison’s assumption she was the housekeeping staff, and her adept insulting of both Rey and even Ben.

“I told him you were precious and this is what he pulled,” Rose said quietly, darkly.

“You what?” Rey asked, whipping around to face her, mopping her face again with the crumbling clump of tissues.

“I told him you are precious!” Rose says indignantly, unapologetically. “Important to me, to alot of people, and I told him you don’t date much so, I was insinuating he should treat you well!” Rose crosses her arms in front of her chest, anger bubbling.

“You told him I don’t date much?!” Rey was shocked and it came out a little louder than intended.

“I was protecting you, Reyrey. I was conveying how a rich and famous Hollywood actor should maybe be gentle with one of the little people and not pull any stunts, which he obviously did not take seriously enough,” Rose is not apologizing for defending Rey, it’s obvious.

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway,” Rey says, resigned, “I’ll never see him again. I’m just another stupid fangirl who got played. I can take this shame to my grave and hopefully you two will be the only ones who know anything about it. And him. And maybe his fucking girlfriend,” she finished, bitterly.
“Us two and Poe,” Finn corrects, adding incredulously, seeing their faces, “what? I live with the man, you think I can get a ‘come here right now’ text at seven in the morning and he won’t know about it?”

Rey groans and covers her face in a pillow.

Of course she doesn’t mind Poe knowing about this nonsense, she assumes Gun and Paige will know all the details by noon, too but, she really just wants it over and done with, dealt with, disposed of, tossed on a pile of relationship fuck-ups and burned and wafting away into the sky forever like smoke.

“And you,” Rose says, pulling the pillow from Rey’s face, “have nothing to be embarrassed about. He does. Not you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I was dumb,” Rey whines, landing backward on the bed with a thud, “so, so dumb.”

“That is not a crime, Peanut,” Finn tells her.

“Or anything to be ashamed of,” Rose says, adding, “if anyone has something to feel bad about, it’s him.”

“Actually, he was very apologetic,” Rey tells them, “he ran after me and basically begged me to listen. He said he didn’t know why she was there and that they were broken up,” she sighs deeply. “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is,” she reminds them all.

“Reyrey, no. You did not deserve to be treated that way. And besides, good things come to those who wait. Good things come in small packages. Good things are worth waiting for,” Rose knows Rey well enough to know how to speak her language and she manually changes gears for her by telling her true things to hang her hat on.

“Thanks, you guys,” Rey tells them, sniffing and straightening, “I love you,” she says, pulling them close for a three-way hug.

Rose is right.

There are plenty of fish in the sea. The sun will come out tomorrow. When life gives you lemons,
make lemonade, Rey thinks, mentally thumbing through all the positive flash cards she has stored for herself over the years like a handy Rolodex of hope.

She stands and tells her best friends, “I’m hungry,” and they leave to let her get dressed so they can head to breakfast.

*****

“You sure you’re ok out here?” Rose asks, sitting opposite Rey in her living room, where Rey is already laying on her couch, ready for sleep under a light throw blanket.

Even though Ben hasn’t been to Rey’s apartment to know where it’s located, and she needn’t worry he’ll show up there, as opposed to the Resistance, where she’d hidden unnecessarily in the store room all day, hoping against hope he would show up and demand an audience with her, even when the sky darkened and she locked up and Finn hugged her goodbye, she still would rather not be alone tonight so, she chooses Rose and Paige’s couch over her lonely apartment for sleep.

“Yes,” she says, her tears all used up and her tattered heart quiet in her chest.

“Thanks for everything today, Rosie,” Rey tells her, sending her a smile and wrapping her arms around herself tightly.

“Oh, Rey,” Rose sighs deeply, giving a lengthy exhale, “I’m just sorry. You deserve someone really amazing,” she says.

“Like Gun,” Rey says and Rose affirms, “like Gun.”

If Rey were more playful she would sing What a Man by Salt N Pepa, or You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown but, her soul is sucked dry tonight, cried out and sleepy, so she just leaves it.

“G’night,” Rey says, taking immense comfort in the fact Rose will be there when she wakes.

“Night, Reyrey,” Rose blows her a kiss and leaves and once again, Rey is alone with just her own arms to tuck her in, her own breathing keeping time, her own words in her head.
When she goes to the Resistance the next day, unlocking and stepping over the threshold, she glances up at the poster behind the cash register.

The princess glares defiantly at her, a blaze of fiery white, draped fabric, brunette coils of hair, a fierce stance and ruby lips and for the first time, Rey looks at her eyes, liquid and brown, serious and competent and she wonders if she could get away with tearing the poster off that wall without making a big deal about it.

She looks at the woman in the poster, the woman whose eyes are like his, unforgettable and powerful, and she remembers what he said about what kind of mother she had been, indecisive and absent, and she rethinks her idolization of her character.

She thinks about burning the poster, renaming the store, getting a new tattoo.

She cuts her eyes at it, glares, lifts her chin, looks around.

She thinks about destroying all the movies the princess ever starred in, all the movies everyone in that entire goddamn family had ever starred in, and then she realizes that’s unfortunately, actually quite a lot of inventory and she cringes, her practicality deleting that option.

She is standing right where he had been, right here on this side of the cash register, right in this spot when he’d touched her wrist and looked into her eyes and told her she was lucky, and the countertop under her hands turns hot as a lit gas burner on a stovetop, biting her fingertips, making her pull back, burned.

She thinks about his unhappy face as the elevator doors slid shut, her name in her mouth, his frustrated hands raking his hair, and Rey stomps off angrily to the rear of the store instead of standing here, replaying her interactions with him further, which are, let’s be honest, only tormenting her now.

_These boots are made for walkin’,_ she tells herself, though she’s wearing sandals, and _shake it off_ and _don’t ya know that you’re toxic_ while she grabs videos off the shelves and stacks them beside the ancient VHS machine, readying them like an arsenal of angsty girl power.
She plays *Double Indemnity* with Barbara Stanwyck and *Of Human Bondage* with Bette Davis and *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* with Donna Reed and *The Birds* with Tippi Hedren on the store TV, and revels in the gutsy misery of them all, and when Finn comes in and sees what’s queued up, rifling through the stack of movies he gives a low whistle and heads to the back, wisely staying silent, leaving Rey, flaming eyes, arms crossed over her chest, propped feet on the counter, to handle customers.

She silently *dares* Ben Solo to show up.

She sends out an invite into the universe, a taunting, flagrant thing, mentally flinging her arms wide invitingly, sneeringly, gathering audacity from the actresses on the TV above her, just *begging* him to come to the Resistance and just *see* what kind of welcome he gets today.

She crosses her arms in front of her and has to remind herself to stop scowling when actual customers show up, people who want a cute rom-com like *Annie Hall* with Diane Keaton or *Sabrina* with Audrey Hepburn and she pities their optimism, their naive delusion, their simple minds and open hearts.

She eats her lunch and dinner like a wild thing on her stool in the store, ripping her food to pieces with her canines, funneling her anger into tearing her meals apart, fueling her fire for revenge with leftovers and yogurt, feeling a streak of independent satisfaction she went about her business all day long at work, proud she had done her job, made money, gotten her shit *done* while her heart was on a shelf in the back store room beside her messenger bag and keys, ready to take home after closing.

When she retrieved her bag at closing, *yep - there it was*, her heart, still battered, heavy and glum, fragile, unchanged since morning and deeply blue as the summer night, and she felt it slide into place again as she walked down the sidewalk towards Rose’s, fitted tightly again into place in her chest, a bruise of sorrow, her bag slung over her shoulder only a reminder *what goes up must come down*.

All her bravado, the fire of spite wilted and sputtered, leaving a trail of forlorn sadness smoking into the night air in its place, the stoked fury dying down to cinders, and there were tears on her cheeks while she walked the North Shore in the summer dark alone.

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“Oh my God,” she heard Paige two days later, in the kitchen, exclaiming over her bagel and spread while Rey rearranged the couch cushions she’d slept on into a normal living room seating area again.

Paige entered the living room and handed Rey her tablet, saying, “look at this,” insistently.

Rey took one look at the headline on the celebrity gossip website, recognized the letters that all screamed at her of Ben Solo’s name and she stepped away as if it had struck her, unwilling to look at it, let alone touch the thing.

“No,” she said, eyes wide, “no way, whatever it is, I don’t want to see it,” she said.

“It says they broke up,” Paige says, regarding Ben Solo and Jennifer Allison, Rey knows, “it says she’s been cheating on him and there’s tons of photos, like tons of photos of her with Josh McBrannon in Italy on some yacht, half naked. It says she’s defending herself saying she’d already been broken up with him for three months already,” Paige explains, bottom-lining the article for her as Rey continues to gather her things and straighten pillows on the couch.

“I don’t want to know,” Rey tells her, “I don’t want to see,” pushing past Paige into the bathroom.

She doesn’t want to hear his name, doesn’t want to see his face, definitely doesn’t want to hear his girlfriend’s name.

Or his ex-girlfriend’s name, whatever, it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t concern Rey in the slightest.

“I don’t care,” Rey says in a singsong voice, grabbing her toothbrush and body lotion from the bathroom sink, dropping it into her messenger bag on her shoulder, avoiding Paige who is still following her around the house, reading from the tablet against her will.

“Who broke up?” she hears Rose ask, as she steps into the hall from her bedroom, making Rey huff and roll her eyes, understanding this conversation was only going to get lengthier now.

“Ben Solo and Jennifer McBitchFace,” Paige replies, granting the actress another moniker, possibly the tenth in a few days but, certainly not the most scathing.
“Ugh, please,” Rey begged, “drop it,” walking to the kitchen to grab some sustenance before heading to work.

“I thought he said they were already broken up?” Rose directs to Rey but, Rey is not interested in having any part of this conversation and she just waves the question away like a house fly, motions to Paige to deal with it, resolute in her decision to stay as far from this discussion as possible.

“It says they’ve been broken up for months,” Paige tells Rose, while Rey tries as hard as she can to tune it all out, grabbing a handful of granola and a banana quickly.

“Well, she was draped around his shoulders like an effing poncho the other night, wasn’t she, Reyrey?” Rose asks Rey who is conveniently drinking coffee, and refuses to speak.

“Who was draped like a poncho?” Gun asks, entering the kitchen, kissing Rose on the forehead where she has seated herself at the table with coffee, as well, as he heads for a cup.

“Jennifer Slutster,” Paige supplies, coming up with another nickname for the infamous woman.

“We talking about Ben?” Gun asks, sipping his coffee, his eyes ranging around, landing on Rey, getting a read on her silent form in the corner, backed up to the cabinetry like she’s holding it up with her hip.

“We are,” Rose says, looking over the top of her mug at him, “Paige says Jennifer Phallycson has been cheating on him.”

“Oh, that’s a good one, Ro,” Paige appreciates the insult, somewhat rhyming with “Allison”.

“Fuck,” Gun intones, giving a sympathetic tick of his cheek. “Poor guy,” he says.

“Poor guy?!” Rose shouts, “poor guy? How about ‘what a dick’? He probably deserved it,” she says spitefully.

“Babe, come on now, no one deserves that. He’s a good guy, that’s a shitty thing that actress did to him,” Gun says to Rose, the one left in the room willing to offer Ben Solo sympathy, even in his
absence.

“Alright,” Rose concedes, “fine. Maybe you’re right…but, I do not agree that we know he’s a good guy,” she says with a slight huff, “he wasn’t very good to our Rey.”

“I gotta go,” Rey says, pushing off from the corner of the kitchen, unwilling to listen to or be a part of the conversation around her anymore.

She’s had enough of hearing Ben Solo’s name this morning, enough hearing about the gorgeous blonde actress and her stupid affair, enough of guessing about their breakup, the state of their relationship and whether he was a good guy, after all.

She’s had enough of sleeping on Rose’s couch and waking to seeing Rose’s boyfriend, wonderful though he was, reminding her of what a good man really looked like, and how she didn’t have one to call her own, enough of sharing a bathroom with three other people and enough of the couch.

Tonight she would sleep at home and tomorrow was a new day.

*The sun’ll come out tomorrow,* she told herself, *it’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life and I’m feelin’ good,* she insisted to herself, feeling every inch a liar and a fake.

*Well, fine,* she argues with herself. *Fake it till ya make it, then.*

“She blew them a kiss as she headed for the front door and slammed it behind her, welcoming the summer sun on her shoulders and toes as she walked the North Shore.

She stopped short a few feet from Resistance and noticed a rectangular box, long and white and recently delivered from the looks of it, laying across the front stoop.

Her heart caught in her chest and she approached gingerly as if it were a coiled cobra, ready to strike her, ready to bite her, skeptically moving forward, somehow already sure she knew who this was from.

She stepped past the box, keeping her heels far above, as if the innocuous, glossy box below was a crocodile, poised to snap and once she had deposited her bag and keys on the formica countertop and flipped on the overhead fluorescents, she breathed deeply and returned to the door to scoop up the box.
The unmistakable, sweet musk of hot-house roses wafted up to her as soon as she lifted the top, piles of long stem buds elegantly cradled in crisp, professionally-folded papers.

The card, small and lying atop the pile of flowers inside called to her like a siren song, magnetic, enticing, and she reached for it with hurrying fingers and pounding heart.

_For Rey who doesn't need rescue but, has all my regret._

_Forgive me._

- Ben

She studied the card in her hand, the unfamiliar, slanted handwriting she could easily believe was his, and she resisted doing something weird like smelling it or running the card across her lips.

_Why do I care?_ she wondered, but still, she stared down at it, every loop, every jot holding a secret, an offer, a whisper of him.

_To forgive is divine,_ she thought, placing the stiff cardstock back in its envelope.

_Forgive and forget,_ she thought, placing the card in her pocket. _Can I? Should I?_  

_The first time someone tells you who they are, believe them_, her heart argued.

She thought about what to do with this shocking abundance of fragrant blooms.

_Find a dumpster?_  

_Start a bonfire?_  

_Return to sender?_

Without bidding herself permission, she felt her eyes slide closed and she was back on the sidewalk, the roots pushing through, the concrete puckering, obliging, giving way.

Ben’s arms were around her in the dark again, his mouth on hers, his voice flooding her mind, his flavor, his scent drowning her, how he held her captive, how he knew somehow, instinctively how to touch her, how to speak to her, how to look at her and she moved through the store as her eyes glided open, dreamily, helplessly to find a way to keep the flowers alive.

She grabbed a bouquet of the blooms, pricking her hands over and over as she tore the ends off gracelessly, stuffing them into a Mason jar full of tap water which she kept on a shelf beneath the cash register, where only she could see them, stopping to appreciate how they made the drab space
look alive and pretty and she glanced at her wrist where there were red roses tattooed underneath her motto, “I don’t need rescuing” and she recommitted herself.

*This is why you don't wait for rescue*, she thought. *This, right here is why*, she thought, seeing her scabbed fingertips, casualties of the rose stem thorns, just beyond her tattoo.

*Sometimes, beautiful things hurt. They don't last.*

*Every rose has its thorn*, she remembered, *'tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all*, she told herself but, even so, when she carried the flowers home after closing and placed the Mason jar beside her bed, and stared at them as her eyes got heavy, she wondered if all that bullshit with the platitudes was even true.

Maybe she should’ve thrown them away.

Maybe she should buy herself sunflowers.

Maybe it was better to go thornless.

Maybe it was better to be without beauty if it kept you from hurting.

Maybe it’s better not to love.

Maybe the risk wasn’t worth it.

Maybe she should have never asked him, never touched him, never met him.

Maybe life would hurt less if people didn’t get the chance to leave you.

She felt her oldest wound, the old abandonment theme fester and cry out to her from deep under the scar tissue, begging her to climb down and dig in, investigate and heal but, she turned off the lights, unwilling, rolled over and squeezed her eyes closed, turned her back on the roses in the glass jar by her bed, ignored their heady scent telling herself instead *the darkest hour is just before dawn*.

She struggled against it, commanded her brain to *stop it* but, there he was, waiting for her behind her eyelids when they closed finally, there to greet her - Paige’s party, the kisses on the dark, hilly sidewalk, the unbearable hope she’d floated in, the beckoning eyes that had held hers, his heartbeat under her hands, his hair through her fingers, his lips on her throat.

She listened to the splatter of fat raindrops on her window as the sky opened up outside and she pulled her blanket up over her shoulder, up to her ear and she only let herself *once* imagine these were *his* secure arms around her, as she wrapped herself tightly in bed and pushed herself to the edge of sleep.
Tomorrow she’d go back to stoic, to proud, to sassy and fixed and obstinate.

Tomorrow she’d leave the flowers on her bedside table while she went to Resistance and she’d let nature take its course and let them wilt as all things do, let them leave her in time as she expects.

Tomorrow she’d buy her own damn flowers and they’d be hardy and painless and cheerful goddamn daisies.

Tomorrow the sky would be bright and she would keep her chin up and put on a brave face and use her bootstraps for what they’re made for.

But right now, as the dark August night deepened, she lamented, she wished hard for him, and Rey lay listening to the rain and she remembered.

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Chapter Summary

Chapter 7, "Remedy" drops Monday.
<3

Chapter 2 of Ben's POV, "True North" will drop Tuesday.

HANG IN THERE, friends.

THANK you to my beta reader, uselessenglishmajor and mood board artist, rileybabe, best sister-partners ever <3

xo
- cupcake
When the temperatures rose consistently only into the sixties and then to no more than fifty, Rey started to feel her heart alleviate itself of her disappointment over her summer.

August was hot and September not much better but, October was nearly here and everything was
finally cooling, clearing the world of a brightness that stings and a heat that burns, offering a chill that slows and a pace that soothed.

Summer hadn’t panned out, simple as that.

It was yucky but, it was over.

She’d been sorely mistaken, badly disappointed, left with a wounded heart and deflated pride but, autumn breezed in crisp and sweet, whisking away fallen leaves and crumbled paper hearts, leaving clean pavement and cool evenings.

Rey traded her flip-flops for mid-calf boots and scarves, ordered pumpkin spice lattes at Maz’s and started watching comedies and romances again at Resistance.

She turned on Notorious with Ingrid Bergman and Rebecca with Joan Fontaine and Pat and Mike with Katherine Hepburn on the TV in the shop and only winced a little when they waxed poetically.

She told herself let it go in the words of Princess Elsa and what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger in the words of Kelly Clarkson and if you don’t stand for something you’ll fall for anything in the words of Irene Dunne.

She shook her head at her gullibility and practiced brushing thoughts of her embarrassing encounter with Ben Solo from her mind, sweeping him away as dutifully and often as the fallen red and orange oak leaves on the front steps at the shop.

She hung out with Poe and Finn lots, even more now that Rose and Gun were so hot and heavy, and Paige was teaching all day, every day, the school year well underway.

She had an Instagram account for the Resistance, of course, called ResistanceVideo, which she’d posted to for two years already, and it was heavily utilized for marketing and promoting the online business of videos and DVDs but, recently she had added her own personal account too, mostly to post photos of Poe and Finn’s cat, BB, selfies of her feet up on the counter at Resistance, and memes only four or five people would ever find funny.

The shop was slow, of course, and she was just scrolling Facebook when she saw an Instagram notification scroll across her phone screen.

Solo Semperfi started following you

Rey’s breath caught in her lungs as if she’d snagged them on a sharp corner.
That could only be one person.

Right?

Could that be anyone but him?

Rey was no slouch about social media and she knew the Instagram account *The Real Ben Solo* was a heavily followed one, likely run by an entire team of social media managers intended to swell the population of manic star-trackers to as much an insanely impressive a number as possible.

She’d looked at the account maybe once or twice, each time feeling nauseated and heartsick, seeing the slick Hollywood character meant to make women who were thrilled he was officially back on the market absolutely froth at the mouth, but, nothing at all of the endearing, arresting man she had met.

The irony that the account claimed to be part of his “real” persona was such a painful fabrication, Rey had promised herself never to willingly look it again.

There was curiosity and then there was such a thing as being a fucking glutton for punishment.

She looked back at the Instagram notification and archived it, sweeping it aside, too.

*You can’t live a positive life with a negative mind*, she reminded herself.

She would have to remind herself of this and many other proverbs about negativity, choice, attention, love, and fortitude over the next week because *Solo Semperfi* was a frequent visitor of her Instagram photos, adding a “heart” to her photos as often as she posted.

She considered making her account private or blocking him but, every time she thought about it, she couldn’t bring herself to separate further from her memories of late July, even if it was almost October now.

*What was the harm?* It wasn’t like they were communicating.

To: Rey

From: Ben

9:22 pm
Hi.

Rey froze.

_Bloody hell,_ she thought, a week after he started following her on Instagram.

_He texted me,_ she thought. _Fuck._

She stared wide-eyed at the text, a shocked emoji still beside his name in her contacts.

_Now, what do I do?_ she wondered, panicked.

_Do I answer?_  
_Do I want to answer?_

She let the question hang in her mind and took her time thinking while she changed the emoji beside his name to a question mark in her phone.

Her brain began opening arguments.

_He’s famous, he’s rich, he’s privileged, he’s in California, he’s powerful, he’s experienced, he’s overwhelming,_ she worried, doubts flooding her mind but, she slowly watched them recede, remembering too, how kind and open and generous he’d been.

The phone, the roses, his words.

_He was spoken for, he could be a cheater, he led you on, he hurt you,_ she wrestled, her heart twisting at the feeling she’d been abandoned but, she let the accusations dwindle remembering too, he’d been direct and polite, and truly distraught that night, too.

His claims, his eyes, his regret.

_He doesn’t know you, you don’t know him, you don’t owe him anything, you can still get out in one piece,_ she offers, an escape seeming a viable option but, she feels the decision made easier remembering too, how he’d shared vulnerably and she had, too, and how she’d agreed to be his friend.

His honesty, his scent, his arms.
She looked at the text again, just the smallest one-word, two-letter greeting.

She reflected on the actress with the long hair and the nightie in his suite, half-naked and prowling.

She allowed herself to recount his words that night, his gestures, his eyes.

She pictures him in California but, Rey’s never been there and all she knows of it is the movies she’s seen depicting it so she pictures Singin’ in the Rain and L.A. Confidential and La La Land and wonders how she could ever fit into Ben Solo’s world at all.

She thinks of how he treated her friends well and how he smiled at her and of his gorgeous mouth and what it felt like to kiss him and she falls asleep imagining taking him to bed.

She is still holding her phone just like that the next morning when she wakes.

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Finn opens the Resistance the next day and Rey arrives at noon with matching autumnal salads from Whole Foods for them, stacked with pecans and apples and yummy salad dressing, and they turn on North by Northwest on the mounted TV in the store while Finn balances the accounts and one customer comes in to return The Treasure of Sierra Madre and one arrives to check out a copy of Cool-Hand Luke.

At 8 pm Finn leaves and heads home to Poe, and Rey is alone till closing at 10 so, she scrolls through her phone aimlessly, playing Candy Crush til she’s bored, perusing Facebook til she’s agitated about something and then Instagram until she sees Solo Semperfi has hearted more of her photos and she feels herself make a decision.

She is done rationalizing and she fashions a reply.

To: Ben
From: Rey
8:34 pm

hi

To: Rey
From: Ben
8:37 pm
Hey.

God, it’s good to hear from you, Rey.
How are you?

To: Ben
From: Rey
8:39 pm
great, thanks.
you?

To: Rey
From: Ben
8:40 pm
Rey, I am so sorry.

To: Ben
From: Rey
8:42 pm
it’s fine. I’m fine, was so long ago!

Ben: It is not. You did not deserve what happened that night.

Rey: I got mixed up with a famous person for one night and got my ass handed to me. actually not really all that surprising.

Ben: I wanted to come to the store the next day and apologize and explain but, I wouldn’t let myself.
Ben: I felt like absolute shit for watching that happen. It all happened so fast. I wanted to come tell you how sorry I was immediately.

Ben: You were so beautiful and welcoming and sweet that night and I hated what happened. I wanted so much to fix it.

Ben: I told myself I was just trying to make myself feel better and to leave you alone but, I can’t stop thinking about you.

Ben: Rey, I haven’t stopped thinking about you.

Rey watches the texts roll in but, she can’t think of what to say at all.

_How does he do this to me_, she thinks, confounded, _how does he cut me to the quick and leave me breathless, even after two months_?

Ben: Rey?

Rey: I’m here.

Ben: I was not with her then, I swear, Rey. We were not together. I would not have done that to you. I don’t know why she was confused but, I swear I had no idea she would show up and I am so sorry for how it turned out.

Ben: I would give anything to go back and change that night. I have a world of regret about how that went down.

Rey takes a centering breath and takes her time responding.

She has no idea how to handle this and no adages are coming to mind that really apply but, she does know one true thing and she tells him.

Rey: I hear you. thanks. and thank you for the roses.
Ben: You don’t need rescuing. I remember.

Ben: I admire that.

The truth is, she had needed rescuing, the next morning.

She’d needed Rose and Finn to come over and hold her while she cried and listen to her complain and take her out for food.

She’d had to leave town for two days to avoid seeing him the next weekend, attending Bonnaroo on a Tennessee hillside with Paige to hear some bands, feel something different, to forget, to clear her head, and she’d used an inestimable amount of energy to process how painful it had all been.

There’s just no way to tell him all she’s really felt since summer so, she redirects.

Rey: how’s CA?

Ben: Temperate. How’s Tennessee?

Rey: chilly. people actually want to stay in and rent movies so, that’s good.

Ben: How have you been?

Ben: How is The Resistance? How are your friends?

Rey: good, great

Ben: May I ask you a question?

Rey: shoot

Ben: Will you be at Resistance tomorrow?
Rey: yes

Ben: May I text you while you’re there?

There’s a part of Rey that immediately sings yes, God yes, text me and fucking scoop me into your amazing arms and make love to me, and an equally noisy part that warns, no, God no, shut this thing down now and get out while you can, dummy.

Ben: I understand if you say no. No pressure. Just wondering.

It’s been so long since her heartbeat was this palpable, since she felt it thrumming beneath her skin.

It’s like someone plugged her in and charged her battery to 100% all of a sudden, like the light bulbs all got replaced in a dark room, like her morning coffee just kicked in and she’s electrified.

She compromises.

Rey: I mean, I will have this lovely phone, after all

Ben: Ok. Great, thank you. I will.

Rey: g’night

Ben: Goodnight.

*****

True to his word, Ben texts her the next day and actually, once the initial weirdness wears off it’s wonderful to talk to him again, Rey finds, enjoyable and fun and easily the best thing she’s felt in months, even if it keeps her distracted all day, on and off.

She actually feels her stomach flip every time her phone lights up with his name and it feels fucking amazing to feel that again.

It feels like privilege, like a gift, like a happy surprise.
He asks about her customers and movies and Finn and Poe, about everything she deals with that day, one thing after another and when Rey heads home, grinning, she makes a detour for a ride on the restored carousel in Coolidge Park, the tinny music her soundtrack of carefree delight.

The next day, he texts her a meme and she giggles, and she sends him back a gif and they text while she eats lunch sitting at the counter in Resistance til she drops a chunk of tomato sauce on her lap from her pizza and Finn comes close to hand her a paper towel and teases her she’s a slob and she quickly hides her phone the rest of the day to keep him from seeing their texts.

A week later when Ben’s texting her, Rose walks into Resistance and sees her standing, mid-shelving with her phone out and a smile on her lips, cases scattered at her feet while she responds to him and she doesn’t hear Rose approaching until she’s directly in front of her.

“Hey,” Rose says, “whatchya doin’?”

“Nothing,” Rey says, stuffing her phone in her pocket guiltily.

“Look awfully smiley to be doing ‘nothing’,” Rose teases her.

Rey goes back to stocking shelves and ignores that.

She ignores texts from Ben the rest of the day except to tell him quit being fun, getting me into trouble, need to work, text me later, admonishing herself for paying so much attention to her phone when it buzzes, for doing anything that she isn’t comfortable telling her best friends about but, when she goes home alone that night and tries to fall asleep it’s frankly, impossible.

She thinks about Ben’s words, his eyes, his face and she tries hard to recall how it felt to be able to weigh his words while he said them, to actually see him.

It’s almost 1 am and she looks a bit rough, smudgy eye makeup and a ponytail, but, she wonders if this will work.

Rey: up for FaceTime?

Immediately, he’s calling her and she takes a deep, unhurried, shaky breath before she answers on the third ring and his face glows back at her.

He’s in a dark room, propped up in bed probably, and his dark hair is a soft halo around his strong
Neither of them says hello, they just sit and look at each other for a minute.

“Your hair’s pulled up,” he says to her, his voice soft.

Rey pulls her eyes from his, looks down when his gaze feels too intense and she just hears his voice come across.

“It would be impossible for me to have any more remorse than I do about how that night went down,” he tells her quietly, almost to himself.

Rey meets his eyes but, she can’t find words yet.

“I can’t…I can’t get you out of my head, Rey,” he tells her, “it’s haunting me. You’re haunting me.”

“Is this…” she begins, gathering grit, “is that because you missed out adding me as a conquest?” she asks him, unwilling to walk a burned bridge for no good reason, accessing vapors of leftover indignation. “Am I another notch on your belt you lost out on? Is that what this is to you? Another easy, star-struck girl in another small town? Because why else would you text me?”

“Okay,” he exhales deeply, “I deserved that,” he looks up at the corner of his room, his eyes searching for something and when he looks back at her eyes he tells her, “I get why you would think that. I get it. But, just, no. Rey. Listen. No, that’s not what was happening. That’s not me. That wasn’t…I know you have no reason to believe me. I know it looked bad, like I was cheating and lying to you. Like I was playing you. And I am not perfect, I know I fucked up that night with you but, honestly, I swear to God, what I felt that night, what was happening between us, that was real. For me, that was real.”

Rey needed this, she needed to see his eyes when he spoke and weigh his words, sift them carefully and feel how they landed, whether they felt true.

She had no means of decoding except her gut and she just goes with it, listens to her heart weighing his claims, judging, looking at him and finding sincerity, choosing to push away the whispers that offered the suggestion he’s an actor, he gets paid to sell a lie and instead she just listens to him.
Only fools fall in love, she thinks.

Wise men say, only fools rush in, she thinks.

“I know I hurt you,” he continues, “and I hate that like you can’t believe. I swear to God, you can’t know how it’s eaten me up. And Rey, I know that you don’t know who I am, exactly but, if you’ll let me, I still want to be your friend.”

This is a reasonable request but, for some reason, Rey feels sad to hear the backtracking that has deposited them back at friendship.

“You want to be friends,” Rey repeats, trying not to be disheartened, like sliding down a ladder on a board game and starting over at square one.

“I do,” he replies, “is that ok?”

Rey thinks.

She thinks about old friends and new friends and silver and gold and she wants to say yes, yes, be my friend and also no, I cannot be friends with you because I am certifiably nuts, a fool who is still crazy about you but, instead she finds a small voice who needs to know.

“Why? Why me?” she asks, not sure she wants the answer but, sure she needs to hear one.

“Because you’re you. Because you’re real. Because you’re strong and soft and authentic. Because you look at me like a regular guy instead of a fucking commodity or a machine. Like I’m me and not fucking Kylo Ren. Like you see me. Because you’re someone who wouldn’t miss her friend’s birthday party, even when another offer came up. Because you wear beads, not pearls or diamonds. Because I picked up that fucking necklace you wore that night to the party and dropped it into my pocket, thinking I would hold it for you and give it back to you later but, I never got the chance and now I still have it and it reminds me of you and of that night and how I got to hold you and kiss you and now it’s just sitting there, burning a fucking hole on the nightstand next to me, staring me in the face every night.”

Rey’s eyes drop as Ben’s get more insistent and fiery, and she feels her heart thud forcibly in her chest.
“So that’s where it went,” she says, speaking down at her lap.

“Yeah, sorry,” he says, sheepish.

“Maybe it’s crazy,” he says after a moment, throwing up a hand in defeat, “but, I - I miss you,” he says with a deep exhale, his chest heaving and then deflating.

“I…I missed you, too,” she tells him, unable to stop herself, only looking up at him when she’s finished speaking the words.

He rubs his shoulder with his free hand, looking hard at Rey through the phone.

She lets him hold her gaze and finally, after a long pause of silence he finally tells her, “good.”

******

There is something intoxicating about moving through life with your heart tied to someone else the way Rey’s is connected to Ben.

Everything seems better, easier, prettier in her world with him to communicate with.

Her heart is springy and her mornings greeted more readily with his predictable texts awaiting her when her eyes open.

Hey, beautiful.

The world around her is a revelation - the sky outside a watercolor painting, the children on the carousel more darling, the friends around her more charming.

When Poe proposes to Finn one night around a fire in Rose and Paige’s backyard, surrounded by strings of twinkle lights, her tight circle of friends all holding phones to capture the moment, Rey knows she will show the video she is taking to Ben and share this moment with him, too, later.

She has an extra measure of unselfish cheer for Poe and Finn knowing secretly she will not be alone when she recounts the beauty of that sweet moment later with Ben.
The last two months have flown, leaving Rey securely deposited in bliss, her day laced with Ben's at all times now.

She tells him everything now, she saves up all her daily thoughts and interactions and dreams and concerns and lays them in his lap every night now, trading him for his own and whether or not anyone else knows but the two of them, she's come quickly to not only wait impatiently for that time at the end of the day, she's not sure how she could do without it anymore.

He feels like her best friend, like her missing piece, like her heartbeat living outside herself.

“Hey,” Paige pulls her aside as they all head back into the house, still celebrating the two grooms-to-be after they've kissed and cheered and hugged everyone and Finn has shown them all the diamond-crusted band Poe had placed on his finger. “I have an idea,” Paige says.

“What’s that?” Rey asks, slipping her arm through her friend’s, happily walking up the back steps into the house with her.

“There’s this guy at work, he’s new this year and he’s pretty hot and he’s single,” she says, raising her eyebrows at Rey.

“Oh yeah?” Rey says, a grin spreading, “tell me more!” thinking Paige needs a date.

“Well, his name is Chris and he’s a 6th-grade science teacher. He’s really cute, Reyrey, like really cute. He’s got blondish hair, sort of dirty blonde and shaved in the back, really clean-cut and very, very blue eyes, you know, like see-through blue like Paul Newman had,” Paige bubbles.

“Oooh, sounds amazing!” Rey enthuses, deciding Paige would look great with him.

“So, you wanna go out with him?” Paige asks.

Rey stops walking and looks at her with knit brows as they stand in the kitchen, the harsh indoor lighting much brighter than the dim romantic backyard they just left.

“Me?” Rey asks, astounded, “why don’t you go out with him?” she asks.

“Ugh, sweetie, no. He’s like 23,” Paige says, sounding slightly repelled, “you know I like my men
more mature,” she winks and shoves Rey a little, reminding her of her inclination towards men 35 and up, preferably seedier than a middle school teacher.

“What are we talking about?” Rose asks, stepping into the kitchen carrying the empty beer bottles from the backyard, joining in on their conversation while Rey processes the suggestion.

“I want Rey to go on a blind date with this cute new teacher from school,” Paige informs her sister, which makes Rose light up immediately.

“Oh! *Fun!* Say yes, say yes!” she encourages Rey, tugging her sleeve excitedly.

“I don’t know,” Rey groans, knowing full well she has no desire to say yes but, realizing her friends not only have no idea Ben has been communicating with her for months but, would likely be horrified to learn of it, considering they watched her recover from her humiliation at his ex-girlfriend’s hand that summer.

“Oh, come on,” Rose whines, “say yes. *Say yes,*” she insists. “I know you, Rey…I know you’re still carrying a torch for Hollywood-boy, and you’re not going to get over it until you start seeing someone else. Which you need to do. It’s been long enough,” Rose trails off, her voice knowing and her back turning to Rey to bag up black trash bags.

“Ugh,” Rey groans in reply, knowing there’s nothing she’d like less than proceeding with that particular plan.

She knows it’s Thanksgiving this week and next week it’s already December and she would much rather think about anything else than how to navigate holidays, plus Ben, plus a blind fucking date but, she doesn’t have a great reason to tell Rose and Paige she is turning this down, and this isn’t the time to come clean, so she doesn’t say anything more.

“Girl, there are worse things than having a date with a cute boy,” Paige tells her, raising one eyebrow and cocking her head to the side.

“You can have it here,” Rose offers, “we’ll just have dinner and I’ll make something delicious and you’ll have me and Gun and Pager here. And the guys, if you want. And, it’ll just be a nice, fun night, how’s that? Doesn’t that sound good?”
Sighing, Rey agrees with a head nod, knowing when she’s lost the battle, outnumbered and outranked.

It’s times like this she wishes she wasn’t single.

Rose chirps and claps her hands together, planning a menu under her breath and Paige leans down and squeezes her arm around Rey’s shoulders, the big sister Rey always needed still there to offer comfort.

“I think this will help,” she tells her quietly.

“Thanks,” Rey smiles up at her from the chair she’s slumped into.

_Shit_, she thinks. _A rock and a hard place._

She doesn’t tell Ben about the planned blind date when she FaceTimes him from home later from her computer, holding up the video of Poe’s proposal to Finn on her phone for them to watch together and he tells her with a wide grin, “aw man, that’s awesome. I wish I’d been there to see that,” and she tells him more honestly than she can express, “yeah, me, too.”

*****

To: Rey
From: Ben
6:22 pm
Hey, baby doll.
Quiet day here today.
Worked out.
Meetings to detail prep for premier.
<you know how I love logistics>
How’s the prettiest girl on earth?

To: Ben
From: Rey
6: 24 pm

hello, handsome!

regular day at the shop

I’m good :)

can’t wait to see the movie!

will be sooo wonderful <3

Ben: FaceTime later?

Rey: is the Pope Catholic?

Ben: Yep. Good. I need to see your face.

Rey: same <3

Ben: What time? I need something to look forward to. Dinner with Snoke and Hux.

Rey: anytime. will make it work.

Ben: Why are you the sweetest, best girl?

Rey: why are you so biased?

Ben: It's not biased, baby doll. It’s 30 years market research. You ARE the sweetest, best girl.

Rey: it’s not actually hard to be sweet to you. You make me smile. :)

Ben: You make me sane. And happy. And other things.
Rey: :)  
Ben: Call you later. Miss you so bad.  
Rey: k. miss u more xoxo  

******

The night of the planned blind date arrives the following weekend and Rey stands in front of her open closet listlessly, her wet hair dripping down her back into the towel wrapped around her, her face pulled into a distinct scowl. 

Nothing looks right, nothing looks appealing. 

She isn’t in the mood. 
This is nonsense. 

She wants to stay home and binge-watch something on Netflix long-distance with Ben after his dinner, hear him laugh at things and huff annoyedly at texts from Hux when they are inevitably interrupted, wants to hear him say goodnight, beautiful. 

She wants what he ignites inside her, what she feels when he says her name, what he shares with her about what he thinks and how he functions and what he wants out of life. 

She wants Ben, not anyone else, she knows it, that’s why she’s changed his emoji to a heart in her contacts list. 

Even if it’s a night in, long-distance with Ben, it’s preferable to anything else. 

She doesn’t want to pull on clothes to impress some random guy who is being innocently duped into believing she is available when Rey’s heart feels anything but vacant. 

It’s getting harder and harder to project singlehood to her friends since she and Ben text constantly throughout the day and she’s taken to carrying her phone around in her back pocket as if it is surgically attached to her.
They haven’t caught on yet to the fact she’s chatting with Ben all day, every day for two months already but, they’re bound to and they’ll have a fit when they do, she knows.

No time like the present, she thinks with a huff, pulling a pair of jeans and a tunic-length, royal purple, cowl-neck sweater from her closet.

Just bite the bullet, she tells herself. Put your big girl panties on and deal.

Twenty minutes later she leaves her apartment feeling resentful, anxious to hurry through the night and annoyed it’s chillier than the weatherman had predicted, pulling a jacket around her up to her nose as she makes her way through the November evening to Rose’s at the other end of the North Shore.

“Hi,” she breathes, fifteen minutes later, shaking slightly and bouncing around to get warm, blowing hot breath on her own hands as she steps into Rose and Paige’s foyer, hugging Rose as she shrugs her jacket off.

“Hey,” Rose greets her, adding “he’s here,” in an urgent whisper, hugging her in return and depositing her jacket in a closet.

Rey smiles and says nothing, just proceeds to give hugs and kisses all around, Gun, Paige, Finn, Poe all present, leaving the newest member of the dinner party for the end.

Chris the Science teacher is standing while she goes through introductions, shaking her hand warmly in both of his own, a huge smile on his face.

He’s cute, I’ll give him that much, Rey thinks, but, he’s no Ben Solo.

He must be 5 inches shorter than Ben and while that’s still plenty tall to suit her normally, Rey can’t help but feel it is representative of every single way this guy doesn’t even hold a candle to Ben.

Chris, or Mr. Sweeting, is polite, he’s inquisitive, he’s appropriate but, Rey can’t feel a single spark under her skin.

It’s like she’s shot through with Valium or like she’s newly woken from a deep nap, or like she’s
She’s totally numb.

She just can’t work up any feelings for this guy, for this date and she can’t help but spend most of the evening thinking about how effortlessly she had fallen for Ben, how swiftly, how utterly.

Everything he does reminds her of how this works so much better with Ben.

His interactions with everyone are polite but, boring to Rey.

He doesn’t connect with Gun at all and she thinks she can almost see Gun making the same comparisons between Chris and Ben that she is.

And, he doesn’t know a damn thing about movies, since apparently he wasn’t allowed to watch them growing up and Rey feels like she could roll her eyes until they fall out of her head at his idea of entertainment being triathlon training.

When they move to the living room for dessert, Rey heads to the kitchen to help Rose grab the apple crumb pies she’s made, and she nudges Rey in the ribs with her elbow.

“So?” she prompts suggestively, “whaddya think?”

She looks so hopeful, Rey just says, “Oh, I don’t know, Rosie,” with a sigh, and leaves the kitchen carrying the dessert plates.

“Where are you from originally, Chris?” Poe asks amiably, making conversation when Rey returns to the living room.

She serves as Rose cuts the pie and surveys the room, recognizing everyone has conspicuously left a seat on the love seat open for her to sit next to Chris and she reluctantly sits beside him before anyone can cajole her to do so in an embarrassingly obvious way.

“Salt Lake City,” Chris says, “lived there my whole life, even through college,” he says.

“Oh yeah?” Finn says, “what’s that like?”
“Oh, it’s fantastic,” Chris says. “I’ve got a huge family, I’m number three of eleven kids, and we lived on ten acres. Grew up playing outside, skiing in the winter, climbing trees in the summer, really idyllic,” he looks like he’s reminiscing and Rey struggles hard to find any foothold, anything to comment on as a commonality but, she can’t think of a single thing.

“I’ll be there for Christmas in a couple weeks and I can’t wait,” he says with a shimmer of love in his eyes for his hometown, and Rey tries to smile but, fails miserably.

“How do you like Chattanooga?” Gun asks, looking between Rey and Chris, taking a bite of Rose’s pie and pulling her down onto his lap as she passes, telling her, “sit, woman.”

“It’s okay, yeah - it’s nice,” he sounds like he’s convincing himself. “Hopefully, one day I’ll end up back in Salt Lake but yeah, I like Chattanooga. People in the South are very nice,” he finishes.

Rey snorts at this because she knows that is patently untrue, that the manners of southerners are designed to offer covert opportunities to be bitchy and judgmental.

Paige glares at her a little and says, “I’ve been to Utah, it’s gorgeous.”

“It’s amazing,” Chris smiles at her, clearly partial to a place Rey has neither been to nor gives a shit about visiting let alone living in one day with eleven children of her own.

The conversation drones on around her and Rey finds her mind drifting to what time it is, to what Ben might be doing, to what she plans to do later, whether she’ll have the chance to talk to him tonight and she catches Finn watching her from across the coffee table as she meanders through her thoughts, so she insists to herself she makes a comment and engage the people around her.

“I had a great 6th-grade science teacher,” Rey says, tuning in and hearing the school-based discussion. “Her name was Mrs. Crofts and she let us have lunch in her room instead of the cafeteria, remember Rosie?” she says, turning to her friend.

“Oh yeah, she was great,” Rose says, smiling from her perch on Gun’s lap, his chin resting on her shoulder as he looks over, his arms around her waist.
Rey feels her stomach wrench hard, a flashback invading her thoughts of the same scene months earlier when she was seated similarly on Ben’s lap.

“Sixth grade is tricky but, science is actually my subject of choice so, I find it very fulfilling. Teaching all those little rascals, it’s very nice,” Chris says.

*Nice guys finish last,* Rey thinks, unable to stop herself from thinking uncharitably, aware only of how many times she’s heard him use the adjective “nice” tonight.

Rey stands up to stretch, hoping everyone will take a hint and follow suit and thankfully Gun pats Rose’s hip, prompting her to stand so he can stand as well.

“Well, I gotta get to bed,” Gun says, “I have to be in by 5 tomorrow morning,” and finally, everyone else takes a hint and moves to gather their belongings and leave.

“Can I call you sometime?” Chris asks Rey as he is leaving, one hand on the doorknob.

“Ya know,” Rey says, patting his shoulder gently. “I’m not up for dating but, it was nice to meet you,” she says, using his adjective of choice.

When he’s gone, Poe and Finn having walked out with him, Rey collapses onto the couch again and pulls her boots off, throwing her head back dramatically and whining noisily.

“*God,*” she moans painfully, eyes closed and limp arms spread wide.

She opens her eyes to see Gun rubbing the back of his neck as he enters from the kitchen, dirty dishes deposited in the sink, to sit down on the edge of the same seat he had vacated five minutes earlier.

“Painful,” he says to her.

“Very,” she agrees, closing her eyes again.

“Rey, you barely gave that poor guy a chance,” she hears Rose’s voice and opens her eyes to see
she’s reentered the room, standing beside Gun’s chair.

Rey feels sort of shitty about it. Rose has a point.

She had not gone into this evening very optimistically but, to be fair, she wasn’t looking for a date.

Rey wasn’t looking for anything, not with Ben in her life the way he was, and it’s not her best friend’s fault she didn’t know about it.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “you’re right.”

“If she’s not into him, she’s not into him,” Gun says, defending Rey, looking up at Rose.

“She has no idea if she’s into him or not,” Rose argues with him, ignoring Rey, “she’s still hung up on the actor, that’s what’s going on here,” she says authoritatively.

Paige enters the room and sits next to Rey, patting her leg soothingly.

“Sorry, Pager,” Rey says, contritely.

“Honey, it’s fine,” she assures Rey, “cute or not, he’s completely boring. I don’t blame you.”

“He’s a Marine,” Gun interrupts.

“Who?” Paige asks, “Chris?”

“Ben,” Gun corrects, looking at Rey and then at Rose, “he’s not just an actor. He’s a Marine.”

“Well, whatever he is, he hurt Reyrey,” Rose says, as if Rey isn’t in the room, as if Rose and Gun are her parents and they’re discussing her love life without her.
“Rosie…,” Rey starts, rolling her eyes with a huff.

“Well, he did,” Rose insists, pouting gruffly.

“Come here, you,” Gun growls, turning to Rose and standing to toss her over his shoulder, “time for bed,” he says.

“Night,” Rose says from upside down, over Gun’s shoulder, heading upstairs.

“Night,” Rey says, smiling.

Paige smiles at Rey and pats her leg again. “I’m off to bed, too,” she tells her, “you staying the night here?”

“Yeah, if that’s okay,” Rey says, unexcited about the prospect of walking home in 30-degree weather in the dark, “I’m gonna curl up right here if you don’t care.”

Paige looks down at Rey’s lap as she sees Rey’s phone illuminate with a FaceTime call, Rey having pulled it from her back pocket when she slumped onto the couch, and when she sees who is calling her eyes go wide, her lips part and her eyebrows nearly reach her hairline.

*Ben wants to FaceTime…*

“Uhhh,” she asks Rey, pointing to the phone, eyebrows shot up to her hairline, a question she can’t formulate in words hanging in her eyes.

Rey looks her in the eye and says “yep,” the only explanation she can give, plenty in and of itself anyhow.

“Alrighty then,” Paige says, standing and blowing a kiss, “I am definitely going to bed now.”

Rey waits until she hears Paige’s door close and she answers the call. Her heart skips a beat and a flush spreads to her limbs as she sees Ben, his smile flooding her in glowing relief.
“Hey, beautiful,” he says, propping an arm behind his head, leaning back against a headboard, his inner bicep tattoo peeking out of his sleeve, teasing her.

“Hi,” Rey smiles at him, leaning back, exhaling a breath she’s held all evening.

“How are you? I missed you like crazy today,” he tells her, smiling.

“Good, tired, missing you like mad,” she replies easily, honestly.

“You look cold,” he says, wearing a short sleeve t-shirt, clearly not cold in California.

“Oh my God, I am,” she says, imitating a shiver.

“I’d keep you warm if I was there,” he teases, a twinkle in his eye, a devious grin on his lips.

“Oh you would, would you?” Rey sends him back a matching smile, pulling her legs underneath her, biting her bottom lip, flirting her heart out.

“Where are you?” he asks. “You’re not home, are you?”

“I’m at Rose and Paige’s,” she tells him, “we had dinner tonight.”

“Oh yeah? That sounds like fun,” he’s always interested in even the smallest details of her life, which Rey finds mind-boggling, since he has a life he could easily fill with far more newsworthy elements than what she provides but, she is used to telling him everything now.

“Oh, it was fine. I had a date tonight,” she yawns, covering her mouth, smiling at him when it dissipates.

“You…you what?” he asks, looking confused.
“Paige set me up on a blind date,” she tells him more clearly, “with a teacher from her school. His name was Chris. He was boring as hell,” she explains, “I hated it.”

“Paige set you up on a date?” he repeats, his brow pinched, his arm descending to his side from behind his head, “Wait - what? Why? And you agreed to it?”

_Danger, Will Robinson, _her brain flashes, _alert! alert!

“Yeah,” she says, wondering whether she should feel defensive or apologetic, “but, it was nothing,” she tells him, “it was terrible. He wasn’t you,” she explains, thinking this is all coming out wrong and thinking what’s _actually _terrible is telling him about this.

Ben sits up.

“Why would Paige set you up on a date, Rey?” he asks, “Doesn’t she know about us?”

“What do you mean? What do you think she should know about us, Ben?” Rey asks, getting defensive now, her mind deciding that’s what’s called for, “That you’re a million light years away and we text all day?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know, maybe what we _are_? Maybe she knows you aren’t interested in any other fucking dates with any other fucking guys, for starters?” he says, obviously annoyed.

Rey matches his posture, straightening herself on the couch, feeling her warmth percolating into indignation.

“Ben, _I _don’t even know what we _are, _” she tells him. _“ _All I know is you’re in California doing God knows what, on another fucking _planet. _No one here knows what’s going on with us. Hell, even _I _don’t know what’s going on with us.”

Ben stands and starts pacing, stopping to answer, “Are you kidding me right now, Rey? You don’t know what we ‘are’? Really? And so you’re going to go on some fucking date with some bastard and then just fucking _tell _me about it casually? You think - what, my day revolves around texting and talking to and spending time with any other girl beside you?”
“How should I know?” She is almost yelling at him, “I have literally no idea what you are doing all day long or what you’re thinking or if you’re dating anyone else. Hell, I don’t even know if I’ll ever fucking see you again. You’re so far away and I don’t know what to think. So, forgive me if my friend wants to see me happy and I agree to a stupid group dinner date with a boring fucking middle school science teacher!”

“If I’m…you don’t know if I’m…you’ve got to be joking,” he’s walking in circles, running his hands through his hair, “This has to be a fucking joke. You don’t know what I’m doing? If I’m dating anyone else? Ok, well, let me clear, Rey, I’m not. I’m not fucking dating anyone else out here. I’ve fucking got a boss and a manager and a publicist handing me phone numbers of fucking starlets with stars in their eyes hoping Kylo Ren will bang them and get them famous, and I keep saying ‘hell no, no way, no thank you,’ thinking I have a girl in fucking Tennessee who I’m going out of my mind missing, who I handed my fucking heart to, who apparently doesn’t know what the fuck she’s doing with it!” he’s definitely yelling.

Rey would yell too, but she’s vaguely aware she’s not at home and the last thing she wants is to wake up Rose and Gun and Paige and explain this mess to them or make them think less of Ben than they already do, so she just hisses at him through a pinched face.

“Well, forgive me for holding you back, Mr. High and Mighty Movie Star. Do me a favor, you go right ahead, and you bang a few starlets. Hell, you go on and bang all the starlets, whatever! I wasn’t able to stop thinking about you and missing you and being heartsick over you or escape your stupid fucking celebrity status last time you broke my heart, I’m sure I won’t be able to this time, either! You want to go ahead and break my heart again, you go on and have the fuck at it!” her chest is heaving and tears have started running at some point.

Ben is quiet, he’s just looking at her, not pacing anymore.

She sits heavily down onto the couch again, hanging her head, wiping tears away.

“Rey… I’m sorry…” she hears him, “baby, look at me.”

“No,” she says stubbornly.

“Baby doll,” he implores, “look at me.”

Rey has a good idea how she looks right now, red-nosed and tear-stained but, she does as he says
and looks up at him anyway.

_He’ll just leave me_, she thinks.

“What are we doing?” she asks, all of the weight of the question falling around her, the hopelessness descending like a blanket of snow, covering everything, “where is this going? This is impossible,” she says, sniffling.

“Rey. Stop,” he says, shaking his head.

“Ben, come on,” she says sadly, pulling her shoulders back, “we live in two different universes. They do not intersect.”

“Rey. _Stop it_,” he says again, emphatically, still shaking his head.

“Ben,” she says, her resolution growing, “you live in your universe out there in California and I live in mine _way_ out here in Tennessee. I don’t belong in your world, Ben, you know I don’t. I don’t even fucking know how to _find_ your world. I work in a video shop and you’re a fucking _movie star_ for God’s sake, _tell me_ how this ever works out.”

“Rey. Please. Stop. Whatever you’re doing right now, _stop it_. C’mon. I’m sorry. Forget I said anything. Let’s talk about this tomorrow. Just go to sleep, please. _Stop_,” he’s getting desperate to shut her down, she can tell, but that isn’t going to work.

_Rip off the band-aid_, she thinks. _The sting means it’s working._

“No, I…I’m sorry…this isn’t working…I…I have to go,” she says, feeling her resolve to figure this out tonight slipping, sure she’ll break down and take it back, or cry again, or embarrass herself if she continues.

“Rey, please. Come on. We _fit_ together, you _know_ we fit together. You _know_ me, Rey, I just don’t want to share you with any other guy, I’m sorry. Okay? I’m sorry. I was just being an asshole,” he insists.
“No, you were being reasonable,” she says, shaking her head now, “and I’m sorry I got all bitchy. You don’t owe me anything. You said you wanted to be friends and that’s what we have been doing - being friends - and I shouldn’t have all these expectations of you.”

He’s interrupting her, talking over the top of her every few words, trying to make her listen, to make her stop talking but, everything has fallen apart again and she can’t make the thread stop unraveling now that she’s pulled it.

“I want you to know, that guy tonight - he meant nothing. Less than nothing, it was less than nothing. There’s only you, Ben. There’s only you and I wish I could be what you need but, I know I can’t be enough, I just know it. You have this world I am flat-out not good enough for and that’s not going to change and we just keep coming back to it,” she says, her voice solid but broken, her face dried of tears but solemn.

“Rey, stop it, please, stop it, goddamn it, stop saying that, for Christ’s sake, stop,” he’s imploring, he’s begging, he’s repeating himself, “you are, you do.”

“I have to go,” she repeats.

“Please, baby, please, just let me call you tomorrow. Just go to sleep and tomorrow is a new day. Ok? Everything’s ok. We’re ok. Ok? Promise me, Rey, promise me you know tomorrow is a new day and we’ll figure this out,” he begs her.

“Bye,” she says, and she can’t hit the button to end the call but, hovers her finger over it, not meeting his eyes, tears welling again.

“Rey . . .,” she hears his voice and it’s too much like last time.

Too much like when he said her name as the elevator doors slid shut, when she lost him the last time, when she wasn’t enough last time and her world collided with his painfully and shattered last time and she ends the call.

Rose’s arms are around her almost as soon as she drops her phone, her face already buried in the pillows of the couch, which she only assumes she’ll never rise from again, tears cascading and the world around her drowned out by her own sobs.

She shudders with regret and heartache, and she only vaguely hears Gun’s voice somewhere nearby, and she quiets herself only enough to realize he’s talking to Ben on the phone, that Ben
must have called and Rose is comforting her and Gun is comforting Ben and it’s all so beautiful and so fucking broken and impossible she can’t bear it and she drowns in the melancholy and love of it all and she cries herself to sleep that way, with Rose petting her hair and Gun’s deep voice in the kitchen talking on her phone to the only soul on earth she could ever miss this much.

*This is why we can’t have nice things,* she whispers to herself as she falls asleep.

The next day, she declines his calls telling herself *it’s for the best,* all his texts go unanswered telling herself *it’s for his own good* and she feels like a human fire pit, all smoke and ashes and decay, capable of offering a distraction and entertainment but, ultimately a tool of utter destruction and waste, always alone, always forgotten.

She changes the emoji beside his name in her contacts list to a broken heart.

She tells herself, *better now rather than later* and *it’s your own damn fault* and *if you love something set it free* and then she slams a dish to the ground on purpose, erupting in rage in her kitchen while she makes dinner because the fucking platitudes *aren’t working* - *they don’t work for this* - and she’s alone and her eyes squeeze back tears while she scoops up broken china and she misses Ben so much she wonders if she’s actually losing her actual fucking mind.

She picks up her phone and looks at the last text and goes to call him because *fuck it,* *what the fuck is she doing,* *she’s in love with him* and *fuck it,* *this is no time for proverbs and song lyrics* but, the last text he sent was an hour ago and she can’t reach him, no matter how many times she tries.

She falls asleep hours later wishing harder than anything she could hear him tell her goodnight, feel his arms around her in bed, shelter him and tell him she takes it all back and feel comforted by him, and not for the first time she still has her phone in her hand when she wakes in the morning to a text.

But, it’s from Finn, not Ben.

He’s telling her he’s heard from Rose and she needs to stay away from the news for a while this morning.

By then, all the news outlets are carrying the story of Ben’s DUI, his mug shot splashed everywhere, his sweet, beautiful, perfect face obscured behind a mask of intoxication and his hair in his eyes, and Rey is absolutely beside herself, paralyzed and destroyed all over again.
It will be nearly two full days before she can breathe again.

******
**Remedy**

Chapter Summary

stunning mood board by the miraculous rileybabe
loyally beta'd by the incredible uselessenglishmajor

Ben's POV, True North - Chapter 2 drops Tuesday.
See you there, loves.

xxoo
- cupcake
'Just look and you will see
I will be your remedy.'

- Adele
To: Rey
From: Ben
4:15 pm
Rey, are you at Resistance?

To: Ben
From: Rey
4:16 pm
oh my God, oh my God, Ben -
yes, God, Ben, where the hell have you been?!
I’m going crazy! What’s going on?
Where are you?
Are you ok??

It has been the longest two days of her life and Rey has come completely unglued with worry for Ben.

It was bad enough to see his mug shot photos all over online but, not being able to reach him and talk to him had almost made her want to pull her hair out.

She considered flying to California and if she had the money she maybe would have but, without it, all she could do was pace and drive everyone around her insane.

Finn, Poe, Paige, Rose, Gun - they were all texting her and one another, trying to make sense not only of Rey’s relationship with Ben now that they knew it had still been going on long-distance for months but, also to understand what had gone down between them on the phone at Rose’s house.

When they heard the news reports of the scandal that he, the headlining star, had missed the massive L.A. premiere of his latest Kylo Ren film the night he was arrested, Rey hid her face in her hands feeling lower than low, horrified for his career, responsible for hurting him and miserable she couldn’t get to him.

What was he thinking? What have I done? Where is he? played on a loop in her head while she fell almost to pieces.
She stared at the princess in white with the blaster on the poster behind her countertop at Resistance and begged her like she was a holy Madonna, begged her to watch over her own son, begged her to be a good mother, begged her to help him and keep him safe.

She paced Resistance’s laminate flooring, wondering, grimacing, hoping while fighting a vicious stomachache.

She was so out-of-her-mind tense she jumped up from the three-legged wooden stool behind the counter of the empty video shop when his text came through and stayed standing while she texted him back immediately.

She stared at the phone in her hand, willing a response from him and she was still standing there, staring down at her phone when the front door opened and Ben walked in.

Rey gaped and ran around the corner of the counter in a flash, not even thinking just flying into his chest, not breathing or second-guessing or stopping.

Ben wrapped her tightly, so tightly in his arms, picked her right up off the floor, her feet dangling, his face buried in her hair, his hands tangled at her skull, his breath in her neck.

She grabbed fistfuls of his jacket, his hair, anything, breathing him in, and squeezed her eyes shut hard, everything disappearing for a minute.

They were still standing like that, Rey hanging in Ben’s arms, faces buried in one another, both heaving breaths when Rey heard Finn’s voice from the doorway of the stock room behind her.

“Oh,” Finn said, surprised and then a second later, “hey, Ben,” before walking out of the room again.

Ben took that as a signal to put her down and he lowered Rey to the floor gently, pulling back to look at her.

He had a baseball cap pulled down over his hair, and a hoodie over a collared shirt above jeans. Clean-shaven, with his backpack still on his shoulders he looked a lot like a college student and Rey immediately understood how he had traveled covertly.
“What are you doing here?” she asked, still stunned.

His hands were still on her, she was still less than a foot from him, looking up at him and he bent to kiss her forehead, cupped her face in his hands and traced her cheekbones with his thumbs.

“If we live in two different worlds, I will leave mine to come find you.”

*And here’s that speechless thing I do when he speaks to me,* she thought, dumbfounded by his candor, his beauty, his earnestness.

Rey couldn’t wait anymore, she reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to herself, drew herself up to his beautiful mouth, feeling her entire body come alive like a bird taking flight just like the last time his lips had been on hers, the last time he blurred her universe and obliterated her view of everything else, months ago.

*How have I managed without this?* she wondered. *How have I breathed? How have I lived?*

“Ben,” she whispered into his neck, catching her breath, feeling him tighten his arms around her harder as she said his name, “I’m here. I’m here. Hold me, hold me tight.”

She wraps her arms around his head and shoulders, as high as she can and his arms encase her, his breath hot in her hair and his scent so powerfully familiar it hits her like a pounding wave in the surf and she nearly wells up with tears.

They stayed tied into one another, trying to regain equilibrium, funnel some sanity back into their worlds, righting themselves after two days of isolation and stress until Finn came around the corner and said, “Peanut, why don’t you go home? I got this.”

Rey nodded and grabbed her things quickly, Ben patting Finn on the shoulder with a small smile and thanks, and Rey took Ben Solo’s fingers between hers and pulled him out the door.

*****

“Want anything?” she asks Ben, as he drops his bag inside the door of her apartment and shrugs off
his jacket.

Rey heads to the kitchen and before she can get there, ready to make coffee or get him water, Ben grabs her around the waist from behind and squeezes his face into her neck, holding her still.

“No,” he mumbles.

“Let’s sit,” she recommends, and since there are few options she’s glad he chooses the couch and they sink into it together. She isn’t far from him, still within arm’s reach but God, he looks so sad, so wasted with exhaustion from traveling, from whatever else has been going on the last two days, Rey feels her heart crack.

“Are you okay?” she prods gently, her hand skimming his shoulder.

Ben leans his head back to rest on the back of the couch, his hands wiping the thighs of his jeans and with a deep exhale, sitting up he says, “can we just…can you come here? Please?” and opens his arms to Rey.

She climbs into his lap, across him, her side pulled to his chest and wraps her arm around the back of his shoulders.

He drops his head to rest against her, on her shoulder and tightens his arms around her as they sit, and she wonders if he’ll fall asleep that way as she runs her fingers through the hair falling against his neck from under his baseball cap. He’s so still, only his chest rising and falling.

This is a moment so tender, so precious and unpredictable Rey could never have had a pithy saying on tap to wrap it up tidily so she just sits and strokes his head and neck and shoulders, willing the tension away.

“I fucked up,” he rumbles against her chest, not lifting his head.

Rey doesn’t move an inch, doesn’t stop touching him, just remains.

“I got so wasted. Rey, I felt so lost, sofucking lost,” he tells her. “I missed the premier. I made so many people so fucking mad - I fucked up my contract with the studio doing that,” he sighs. “I spent the night in county lock-up. It’s just all so fucked up. All I could think was to find you. To
get up and come find you. Be with you. Did I do right? Is this ok? Is that ok?” he asks, lifting his head to look into her eyes.

“Ben,” she tells him, looking in his eyes, his jaw in her hands, emphasizing carefully, “yes,” adding, “it’s ok, you are a human and you are allowed to be one, just like the rest of us.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, his hand running through the base of her skull in her hair, “I’m sorry, I just lost it. Rey, I’m lost without you,” he tells her with mournful eyes.

“No, Ben, no, don’t apologize,” she whispers back, “I’m the one who’s sorry. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. It was all wrong, I was so wrong, and I knew it. I was so wrong, Ben, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” she tells him, leaning to offer her lips to his again, thankful he takes the invitation and brutally pulls her to himself, desperation tinting the flavor as he plunders her mouth.

Rey can’t think of anything else but getting closer to him as soon as he’s started kissing her.

They’ve wasted enough time, she’s waited long enough.

She pulls her shirt over her head and throws it behind her somewhere, taking his ball cap off and throwing it, too.

She takes a minute to run her fingers through his hair, feeling his hands on her skin and moves to unbutton his shirt till she can get enough of his skin under her hands she can breathe correctly again, can think straight, and she turns to straddle him while still kissing him.

She lifts her ass off his thighs and straddles him closer, up on her knees, her pelvis to his chest, feeling his lips twist and suck her mouth and she runs her fingers through his hair, pushing his head back against the couch as his hands cup her ass through her jeans.

He lifts her into his arms and stands and heads through the only doorway, carrying her with messy mouths and tightening limbs until he crushes her into the mattress of her bed.

Every time she catches his eyes as they fly open between kisses as they pull one another’s jeans off, his stare at her is blazing hot, an inferno and she’s burning to death as his fingertips drag her skin, pulling her bra and panties off, pushing themselves as closely as possible to one another, both too determined and wild to take time to look one another over closely right now, too interested in making up for months of deferment, all that wasted, squandered time.
Ben kisses her as she’s always wished to be kissed, the way no one else ever has before, only him, and she tells him with an unashamed groan, her bravery an organic byproduct of her passion and his hands on her,

“I dreamed this.”

“Oh,” he groans in return, “baby, me too, me too, but, fuck, I swear to God, you're better. The real you is so much better,” kissing her as he lays down on her with his full weight and she pulls him closer, wanting to absorb it all.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he says softly, kissing her mouth, her chin, her ears, her cheeks.

“Ben,” she says, his body pressing insistently against her, his mouth on her skin, she stares up at the ceiling beyond him and hears herself honestly confess, “please. I have been waiting for you so long. I need you. Please. Hurt me.”

He pulls back from her and looks her in the eye, his eyes twin black flames.

He pushes her knees aside with his thighs and stills himself above her, moving to align himself with her and holds her gaze as he enters her completely, watching her gasp loudly, watching her eyes lose focus and tip her head backward, watching her breasts heave and lift, watching her drop her chin and refocus into his eyes and smile at him with a woman’s wicked warmth of victory before moving deeply inside her and ravaging her mouth with his.

“I’m lost without you,” he tells her again, his voice whispering into her parted lips, his body stretching hers as his hands squeeze her ass underneath her, holding her still.

“I’m here,” she reassures him, “I’ve got you,” as she whispers back into his mouth for him to let go, nothing restrained, no rationalizing, no resistance, no rebellion left.

Whatever she had known before with other men, it could not have been sex, not really, not compared to this.

This is such a world apart, the noises she hears herself making, the sensation of Ben crushing her, the way her body responds to him instinctively, the filthy things she wants and imagines, the dreams she sees bloom in her head as he runs his hands over her, his fingers knowing her already somehow, making her tremble and yearn and claw at him, pushing himself higher and deeper into her as he moves until she breaks up in a million shards of light around him.
Overwhelmed and breathless, and floating back to earth, she watches his beautiful, manly face and learns what it is to see him come undone, how he looks an inch above her awash, aching in bliss, the way she dreamed of seeing him once before, and she pulls him close as he quakes, pulls his head to her chest, pulls his hair back from his brow, and smiles to herself knowing so deeply this - right here, this moment - this is what songs are written about.

That’s where he stays as sleep claims him, his head on her chest, his legs twined with hers, his arms around her, here in her bed where she’s cried tears of wistfulness over him - her Ben, the real Ben - and her soul crows in joy as she slips into a dream underneath him.

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Rey woke up around 7 pm and snuck out of bed, Ben having rolled to his side and she tip-toed out of the room, quiet as a mouse though he looked dead to the world, his arm thrown over his eyes, so much more peaceful than when he had shown up a few hours earlier, Rey couldn’t help but smile.

She snuck over to the living room couch and retrieved Ben’s button down shirt from the floor, inhaling it against her face before sliding it on, smiling as she mentally replayed the way she’d deftly removed it from his massive frame and heard him whine low in his throat, just as low as his speaking voice, as she did so while he kissed her, thinking how powerful she had felt, how glorious his skin was, how delicious he smelled.

She rolled the sleeves up and closed a few buttons, and ordered sweet and sour chicken and fried rice for both of them from China Palace delivery on her phone.

She read through her texts from Finn, including several gifs of suggestive eyebrow raises and fist bumps and texted him back he’s here, Finn, HE’S HERE while she curled up on the couch, smiling to herself and biting her bottom lip.

Take tomorrow off, he’d insisted and Rey squirmed in pleasure at the reason.

Ben showed up.

Ben wanted her.

Ben came to find her.

In her world.

He left his home, his universe, and untethered himself and flew to her.
Rey sits in the near-dark of the living room and shakes her head slowly, willing herself to make sense of it and when she can’t she shrugs once and smiles out the window.

She pulled her hair into a bun and looked off dreamily at the dark sky blowing a fall breeze around outside before she shivered a little and realized there was no need to be out there alone when she could be in bed with Ben and she came close to running back to her bedroom.

She climbed on the bed and laid down next to Ben on her belly, watching him sleep for a minute, her chin balanced on her fist, and when she couldn’t stand it anymore she moved closer, her eyes studying him as she carded her fingers through his hair.

He stirred and she watched his eyes flutter open thinking *I’m seeing him wake up for the first time*, seeing him work through disorientation and then remember where he was, seeing him turn his face to her and pulling her to roll further into his arms to snuggle his face into her neck.

“Time is it?” he mumbled groggily, kissing her throat.

“Seven. I ordered Chinese food,” she told him, wrapping herself around him, feeling his thigh between her legs where she had forgone panties, squeezing him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

He pulled his head away from her and ran a hand through his hair. “Are you an angel?” he asked her, leaning back on his pillow.

“Yes,” she teased him, “I am. I’m your guardian angel and I’m here to give you dinner.”

He reached up and gently pulled at her hair tie, watching the bun fall, slowly running his fingers through her hair, *fucking messing it up*, Rey thought, watching his eyes as he worked.

“You fucked my hair up,” she told him.

“I have literally done that to you in my dreams,” he says.
“What else have you done to me in your dreams?” she prompted, feeling wanton and dangerous and aflame, taking in his chest and arms, unveiled and strong in the semi-dark, realizing Ben Solo had admitted to dreaming of her at least once in his life.

“I’ve seen you in my clothes like this,” he tells her, touching the collar of his shirt around her throat, moving his hands beneath it to trace her curves, “and you’ve let me taste your sweet cunt while you’re wearing them.”

“Anything else?” she breathes, running out of air as his hand finds her wet, and he spreads her legs further around himself.

She is losing the ability to bluff and is about to become hopelessly incapable of speaking.

“I’ll show you,” he murmurs, rolling her by the hips up above him, her hair falling around them like a curtain, as he brings her head down to meet him, his lips catching her in a kiss.

“There’s nobody but you, baby doll,” he tells her as she moves above him, taking everything he can give her and bringing them both to the edge, his hands on her breasts, her face, her shoulders, her hair, her hips, “nobody for me but you, Rey.”

That makes her cry actual tears, it feels flawless, too perfect to be real, too much exactly what she had fantasized after her hopes were dashed in July, and she can’t keep the tears from slipping past her eyes onto her cheeks.

Ben moves quickly under her, moving her until her back has traded places with his, hovering over her, kissing her and wiping her tears away, and she hears how pitiful she sounds when she says his name.

His hands cage her head while he kisses her sweetly, and she reaches up to thread her fingers between his as he tells her again, “there’s no one else, I swear it. I promise Rey, it’s you, it’s you,” while she sniffles and nods.

A knock on the front door breaks the moment and Rey tells Ben, “dinner,” when he freezes above her, his eyes confused.

“I’ll get it,” he says and climbs off the bed, walking naked to the living room to pull on jeans and open the door, handing the delivery boy too much money and refusing change so hopefully, he’ll keep quiet if he recognizes Ben.
Rey sniffs hard and follows suit, checks her face in the bathroom mirror, rubbing smudged mascara from under her eyes, and leaves her hair messy before meeting Ben in the kitchen and helping grab their dinner.

The domesticity of being half-dressed in his shirt, in her kitchen makes her heart do somersaults, and she needs to put her arms around his waist, hug his bare chest against her cheek, listen to his heartbeat.

She needs to feel him tilt her face to his and kiss her mouth and squeeze her ass under his hands, and she needs to look up into his eyes and read them for a minute before she can pour drinks and let him follow her back into her bedroom to sit on the bed and have a picnic with him.

*****

“What do you need?” Rey asks Ben, side by side in bed again, pillows under their heads, dinner finished and left on the floor beside the bed.

“Nothing. This. You,” he tells her, his face calm, his eyes truthful, his hands on her, skimming her skin, lacing her fingers with his.

He pulls her left wrist to his face and studies the tattoo, the one that reads “I don’t need rescuing” and he skims his lips over it, back and forth, and sighs as he places her hand on his chest over his heart, palm down.

“What if it’s a good thing you don’t because I need you to rescue me?” he asks. “What if I am the one who needs rescuing?”

Rey studies his face.

His eyes are as nakedly vulnerable as she’s ever seen them, his heart as exposed as a man’s can be.

“I think you are underestimating yourself, Ben Solo,” she tells him.

Ben sighs and rolls to his back, still pressing her hand flat against his chest, and looks up at the ceiling, a huge exhale leaving his lungs.

Rey trails her hand from his chest to caress his face and all she can hear is what a wonderful world and Louis Armstrong’s voice singing.
He is facing the ceiling when he speaks. “Some women, they want to go to bed with Kylo Ren and they wake up disappointed to find Ben Solo.”

Rey props her elbow on the mattress, lifting her torso so she is above Ben, making him turn his face and look up at her. She feels gravity in the moment tangibly.

“How would anyone want Kylo Ren when they could have you?” she asks.

He studies her face, and she holds still to give him opportunity to measure her words.

“I know who you are,” she says slowly, methodically, “I see you. Ben, you are who I want.”

It is a good thing it’s dark as pitch because Rey would have been a little mortified by how animated she was about to become in bed in broad daylight.

Ben made her come over and over, his mouth licking her to oblivion, his hands managing her and lifting her around him, his body stretching and filling and defiling her over and over for hours until late into the middle of the night.

She yelped and moaned and giggled and gasped his name until she could barely breathe, anxious to learn all the ways he could drive her to insanity and carry her back down again.

She used her mouth to learn his body, and her body to carry his seed, and her heart to remedy his wounds.

The only music she heard was the sound of his voice, his mouth saying her name, asking her for more, begging her to give more of herself to him, to show him, to come for him, to belong to him, telling her thank you over and over, asking her to let him.

The only words she remembered were the ones he whispered, dark and filthy and gorgeous and right.

The only scenes she conjured were the sight of his body, his black eyes, his beautiful hardnessentering her over and over, his sweet face tortured in delight, his hands on her skin, his mouth on
her breasts, his fingers inside her.

It is the first time in her entire life Rey falls asleep surrounded by a strong pair of arms that encompass her with all the grace and adoration she’s always craved.

It is surreal.

She breathes him in - her Ben - and in the flickering minute before sleep pulls her under, she laces her fingers with his against her naked belly and feels his breath behind her in her neck, hears him sigh and feels him pull her against himself tighter and she thinks,

_All is calm, all is bright_. And she sleeps in heavenly peace.

******

It is freezing cold the next morning, quite literally, the ice hanging in shiny, crystal slivers from the gutters above Rey’s windows outside, the ground sparkling brighter than a cement road has any right to, the apartment impervious to it anyway, thanks to Ben’s body around Rey’s when she wakes.

Rey knows immediately where she is and with whom, her thoughts as gleaming and translucent as the world around her, before her eyes even open.

There is only one man she wants this way, only one body she could find this much comfort in, only one person who brings her this much abundance of joy.

She rolls over and twists herself into his chest, breathing in his leftover cologne, the scent of sex on his skin, his rich flavor of masculinity filling her spirit up with more desire and satisfaction than she would have dreamed possible before she met him.

Her head is tucked under his chin, his arms sleepy around her, his hands under her bottom, apparently his favorite resting place, she muses with a sly smile.

“Hi,” she murmurs into his sternum, her lips grazing his skin as she speaks.
She feels his arms tighten around her and she commits his voice to her memory when he replies, “good morning, beautiful,” the first time to speak that phrase in person.

She pulls back to look at his face. “How you feeling?” she asks him.

“Whole,” he answers thoughtfully, his eyes on hers, his body still around her.

Rey smiles at him. “Want a shower? Or food?” she offers.

“Yeah,” he tells her, “after I fuck you,” and he rolls her onto her back, moving underneath the blankets towards her belly, descending between her thighs while she giggles and holds onto his hair for dear life, his hands wandering her body, his mouth setting her soaring.

She’s whispered and shouted and gasped his name over and over before the morning is over, and the sun has begun to melt the icicles outside, and when she rises from the bed, stepping over last night’s Chinese food remnants and clothes, she is a peaceful woman, as carefree and indulged as humanly possible.

All my heart is yours, she thinks, in the words of a book she knows by heart, my very soul demands him, she understands, remembering the scene from so many adaptations.

I have, for the first time found what I can truly love, she thinks, I have found you.

*****
Chapter Summary

moodboard by my rileybabe
beta by my uselessenglishmajor

Ben's POV, True North Chapter 3 drops tomorrow

Next posts...Monday 4/23 & Tues 4/24

xox
"There's a rhythm to my chaos and it's you."

Beau Taplin || The rhythm to my chaos.
“To revive a man is no small thing.”
- Nachman of Breslov

“Want to come read through this with me?” Ben asks, having made it back to bed before Rey after the shower they shared.

Rey had never had the kind of relationship that entailed co-showering before, and therefore didn’t think about speed and winter and the size of her hot water tank being factors to consider, so when the water had officially run cold before she was done making love to her man, by then so overworked and involved she was immune to the water temperature, she was shocked at how quickly she chilled when she turned off the water and stepped outside the steamed curtain.

Now, however, she was slightly shaking as she pulled her arms into a thick robe and knotted the belt around herself tightly, pulling knee socks on and running as quickly as possible to Ben’s side, jumping on the bed inelegantly and bombarding him in her attempts to warm up again, teeth chattering and hands icy.

“Good God, woman,” he complained, feeling her claw at him to steal his body heat, rubbing heat into her arms and legs and back through her robe, “take this off,” he suggested.

“Ben Solo, you’re going to break me in half,” she warned him, “you’re trying to kill me with sex,” she argued, playfully.

“I can warm you up,” he offered, unwrapping her robe like a gift, covering her like a bear skin rug, chest-to-chest, hands laced.

“Why aren’t you cold?” she chattered, unable to keep from kissing him when his mouth was an inch above hers and his naked body was promising her trouble and pleasure and secrets and fun.

“You make my blood run hot,” he growled at her, as he pulled her robe off her shoulders, determined, masculine, single-minded, focus in his eyes.
Within another minute she was hot enough she could bear it when he sat up and unrolled her socks slowly, eyes locked on hers.

One minute more and her body temperature wasn’t an issue anymore with his body claiming her every inch.

A minute after that, she was overheated and begging him to come in her mouth.

“Rey, God, fuck, you are my heaven. You look so beautiful, so pretty right now, baby doll. Oh my God, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he told her between groans, head thrown back, looking down at her mouth around him from up on his knees, up on the bed, so close, so close.

*He was right*, she thought, as he pushed his cum inside her with his fingers, while he licked her nipples and groaned into her skin until she broke apart, bringing her to the sweetest climax when it was her turn, whispering to her to come for me, baby, come for me, *he was right*, she knew, *he could warm me up.*

******

“What are you reading?” she asked him, buried in his arms in bed afterward, wondering if she’d ever have the strength or desire to leave a bed with Ben in it again.

“A script,” he told her, “and if you swear you won’t laugh I’ll tell you what the project is.”

“I do not swear it,” she told him, “but, tell me anyhow.”

“I haven’t signed on yet,” he hedged, ”but, they want to screen test me for Batman.”

Rey howled and slapped his chest gently and roared with laughter.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she swore, as he rolled his eyes at her and huffed a little
“Alright, I know,” he said, “but I have three pictures left in this shitty contract with Snoke and I have to do something and they’re done with the Batfleck so…” he trailed off.

“I’m sorry,” Rey said one last time, wiping tears of laughter away for good, regaining composure.

“Let’s hear it… Batben,” she said with a snort, causing him to threaten to disentangle himself from her completely, requiring another elaborate and lengthy set of apologies before she settled back into the crook of his arms in bed, script folded back in his hands on his chest where they were propped against the headboard of Rey’s bed.

“Ya know, I do have to choose some project,” he defended, “I can’t just not do my job and how many Kylo Ren movies does the world really need?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she argued, “I think there are quite a lot of fans who would be happy if Kylo Ren movies were in constant production.”

Ben sighed and rolled his eyes, “I mean, he’s a great character but, I want to do more,” he said, an arm moving to prop his head up behind him, his Marine tattoo bulging.

“What your fans want you to do, and what you want to do might be two different things,” Rey commented, thinking how this would have been an ideal time to toss out a platitude, a wise retort and yet, the most natural thing she had done was just talk.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“Me?” she asks, sort of taken aback.

“Yeah,” he says, “I’d kind of like to know what my girl thinks,” he confesses.

Rey smiles at that. Has he called her this before?

Probably.

Hell, he’s fucked her half a dozen times in the last 18 hours so, whether or not they’re officially titled may not really matter at this point but, there’s a part of Rey that is a traditionalist, borne perhaps of so many hours watching vintage movies and it warms her further head to toe, to hear the endearment.
She feels like she’s Judy Garland and he’s Mickey Rooney in the Andy Hardy films.

She snuggles into his side and shines a smile up at him unabashedly.

“I think you’re beautiful,” she says into his eyes, “and good and strong and talented and brave.”

Ben strokes her cheek and looks at her for a minute before kissing her tenderly.

“And I think you’re the best woman I know,” he tells her, “and you have the sweetest goddamn tits.”

Rey rolls her eyes as his tone changes from touching to lewd and he smirks.

“I’d really like to see you do something dramatic,” she says, “like North & South or Little Dorrit or Pride and Prejudice.”

“Really?” he asks, looking honestly surprised, “you think I could play that kind of role?”

Rey sits up a bit to look at him more directly, “I think you could do anything.”

“Yeah but, you think I’d be any good at something that caliber?” he asks, seriously.


“Huh,” he says, pondering, clearly mulling.

“Plus, you have a fan base that would lose their ever-loving minds, too, so that wouldn’t hurt,” she adds, not sure she loves the fact it would make women all over the world lost their shit to see Ben Solo in a fucking vintage three piece-suit on screen but, aware this is what you sign up for when you love someone in the public eye.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, I think my fan base prefers my face fucked up and my ass being
handed to me on screen,” he says, used to rough and tumble cinema.

“I’m talking about all the ‘Darth Darcy’ fans,” she tells him. “Ya know, all the women who think you’re the modern soap opera version of Darcy,” she continues, going on as he continues to look somewhat bewildered.

“Darcy?” she prompts, waiting to see it register.

“From *Pride and Prejudice*? As in, you’re tall, dark and handsome, the typical Byronic hero, designed to make women throw themselves at you…ring any bells?”

“Who’s Darth Darcy?” he asks, clearly unfamiliar with an entire sub-culture of the fan base Rey has run across.

Sighing and smiling she makes a mental note to send him some stellar fan fiction featuring Kylo Ren sometime, and she shakes her head at him and says, “all I’m saying is, you’d be amazing in anything, including something classic. I know I’d pay to see it,” she promises.

“Oh yeah? You would?” his smirk has returned.

“I would,” she says, scooting away a little, seeing the predatory gleam in his eye.

“You want to see me all buttoned-up and fancy and proper, is that it?” he says, prowling towards her slowly as she moves further away.

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt you to try, and I *suppose* I could be *coerced* into buying a ticket,” she teases, actively avoiding his hands as he paws at her.

“Is that right? You’d *deign* to see me on the big screen, eh, baby? Hmm?” he’s almost got her, but, she squirms away at the last minute.

“I mean, I’d at least *rent* it once it came out on DVD,” she says, provoking him purposely, ending with a shriek as he pounces on her, grabbing her around the waist and throwing her into the center of the bed.

Rey is giggling as Ben pins her underneath him, feigning a wrestling match, laughing her head off
at his hands assaulting her with tickles and his mouth nuzzling her neck, when she hears her phone ding, a text received.

“Oh no. Hell no you don’t,” he argues when she makes to reach for the phone on the bedside table, trapping her further and moving his mouth lower to further torment her.

On the second text notification, Rey finally shoves him off hard enough she can sit up, red-faced, laughing and out of breath from their tussle, pulling the sheets up to her armpits, slapping his bottom as he climbs out of bed after she whines “Ben,” and instructs him, “go make some hot chocolate” before reaching for her phone and pushing her hair behind her ears.

She smiles and wrinkles her nose at him as he winks at her and marches his naked self proudly out of her bedroom, and she sighs noisily and happily, dragging her eyes away only when he’s out of sight to see who has interrupted their escapades.

To: Rey
From: Finn
2:32 pm
You guys want to meet for burgers with me and Poe tonite?
Or, are you two still in bed?

Rey shouts to Ben, in the kitchen, “want to meet Finn and Poe for burgers tonight?” adding, “think that’s ok?”

Ben comes back into the bedroom carrying two mugs of hot chocolate, about as adorably as a naked man returning from a kitchen can look, a goddamn idealized vision intended to satisfy the female gaze, and he asks with a nod towards her phone, “that what the text was?”

“Yup,” she says, sipping the drink, warming her hands which have gotten chilly without Ben in bed with her to keep them occupied, “you want to?”

“Whatever you want, beautiful,” he tells her, settling beside her, covers up to his waist again, next to Rey, “I’d be happy to see them, or I’d be happy to keep you cornered here in bed where I can ambush you.”
Rey snuggles into Ben, kissing his shoulder beside her just because she can, just because he is so fucking cute, so near, so tempting and she leans her head on his shoulder while she texts Finn back.

To: Finn
From: Rey
2:40 pm
Sounds great. Meet you @ the Grill @ 6?
Also, yes we are.
Dinner better be quick. ;)

“Done,” Ben announces, seeing she’s finished sending Finn a response, deciding he’s given her enough time to text and he takes her phone from her hands, drops it gently onto the carpet beside her bed and wraps her up in his arms where she remains naked and sated and blissful until darkness descends and her stomach growls and her man allows her a chance to pull clothes on and lead them to the food they genuinely require at this point.

*********

Ben and Rey walked into North Shore Grill at 6 pm on the dot, hands laced and boots stomping off crusted ice, and smooshed themselves into the furthest corner of a booth in the back of the restaurant.

They’d beaten Finn and Poe as Rey is accustomed to, giving them enough time to order waters and start making out before the guys arrived so that when the couple walked to the table with the hostess, one of Ben’s arms was around Rey’s shoulders against the booth wall behind her, and his other was cradling her head as he kissed her nearly to unconsciousness.

“Hey,” Poe said, sliding in the opposite side of the booth, across from Ben, accompanied by Finn next to him, “you’re back,” he said, reaching across the table to shake Ben’s hand.

“Hey, yeah,” Ben said, reaching back and shaking hands, first Poe’s and then Finn’s, telling them, “missed my Rey,” looking at her when he was done.

She couldn’t help it. She beamed.
She was devoid of any embarrassment whatsoever. This was Ben and he was here finally, and fuck it, she wanted to kiss him whenever she wanted.

She’d watched these two guys climb all over one another for nearly five years now, there wasn’t any way she was being discreet if she didn’t feel like it.

“Can we get a pitcher of beer? Whatever’s on tap, please?” Poe asked the server when she arrived, putting his arm around his fiancé.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Ben smiled, motioning to Finn’s sparkling band, once the server had left to fill the drinks order, smiling and taking a drink of his water when it arrived, his hand on Rey’s knee beside him.

“Yeah, yeah, finally got this stud to agree to make an honest man outta me,” Poe replied, pouring beer into his and Finn’s glasses.

“When’s the big day?” Ben asked, moving his hand to Rey’s shoulders, tugging her closer.

“Spring,” Finn said, “late spring. Still choosing but, we think around early May,” he replied, smiling at Poe.

Rey listened happily, watching the men she loved most in the world chat and sat in bewilderment this was her life: that she had dear friends and a guy she was crazy about and she was here with them, together, listening to them talk to one another.

The beauty of it stung her with gratitude and even if she had tried, she couldn’t have planted a proverb on this moment.

It was perfect as it was.

“Can - can we get a picture?” Rey heard a voice beside her, next to the booth.

She turned to see three women, young and flirty, probably college co-eds with sparkly-cased phones in their hands and fleece-lined boots beneath their tight yoga pants gazing at Ben beside her.

All three panted breathlessly at him, wide-eyed and demure, ignoring Rey completely, false eyelashes and curling-ironed hair quivering, lips glossed shiny and giggles commencing when he
said, “sure.”

Rey slipped out of the booth and made way for Ben to move near the young women, ducking to match their height better, swarmed by them on both sides, smiling for their phones to snap a selfie a piece.

She listened to them as they flew at him with compliments of *I love your movies* and *Kylo Ren is the best* and *you’re amazing* and *you’re my favorite actor ever* and *thank you so, so much* and *sorry to bother you* and Rey fought hard as nails not to undo her lifelong devotion to feminism and sisterhood.

She had an innate inclination to hate their blonde guts with all her heart and she was taken aback by her uncharitable animosity and ill-will.

She reminded herself it was Christmastime and to be of good fucking cheer.

Sitting back down, Ben’s arm wrapped around her again, Poe asked, “that ever get old?” tossing a sideways nod in the direction of the women who were outside of earshot.

“I’m pretty used to it,” Ben said shrugging, “plus, I grew up seeing my mom and dad handle it everywhere we went so, it’s pretty much second nature, I guess by now.”

Rey groaned and rolled her eyes a little, reaching for her straw. “I’m not used to it,” she admitted.

Ben tightened his arm around her and kissed her forehead.

“Fans are my paycheck,” he told her, “without fans, no tickets get sold. Without tickets sold, no moolah.”

“Yeah,” Rey said, feeling unconvinced.

Rey thought back to seeing Ben at the hotel in July, of Jennifer Allison hanging from his body behind him, of how much more appetizing a picture he was with a glamorous counterpart than with her, and she felt the green-eyed monster of jealousy and the ghost of her abandonment wound whisper to her, both beckoning her to come listen.
“And you had a shitty week, my friend,” Poe commented to Ben, alluding to his arrest and drama in California, taking a swig of his beer and pouring another.

“That I did,” Ben said through puffed cheeks, a huge exhale escaping, “it was a fucking nightmare, I’ll be honest. Not my finest moment,” he admitted and Rey squeezed his knee, looking at him.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think you did the right thing coming and seeing our Reyrey here,” Poe replied, “you seem to like her an awful lot,” he said, popping a chip in his mouth from the basket in the center of the table.

“I do, I do,” Ben said, looking at Poe and then turning to Rey adding, “I love her.”

Poe stopped crunching, Finn froze mid-sip of his beer and Rey felt time suspend as she met Ben’s eyes.

After a beat, he said, looking at her, “baby doll, you know I do,” bringing her hand to his lips and kissing it gently, putting it back on his knee afterward.

“You’ve never said that before,” Rey said, forgetting anyone else was around, listening, alive, on planet Earth, anything.

“Neither have you but, we know, don’t we?” he asked, squeezing her into his side, looking at her face with a curiosity Rey could almost see underneath, his anxiety hiding.

“I mean,” she began, “I’ve known since last summer, I don’t know what the fuck took you so long, Ben Solo,” she said, a smile breaking across her face, her tank of self-confidence filled to overflowing immediately, her soul expanded and winging into the heavens.

She reached up and kissed his plump bottom lip, whispering “I love you” into his eyes and grinned when he said “I love you” before turning back to the guys across from them.

“It’s like being friends with the fucking Notebook couple,” Finn said to Poe, regaining composure and returning to the chips.
Ben laughed and Rey threw a chip at Finn across the table and Rey was reminded of her recent, horrifying dinner group date with Chris the science teacher with a mild shudder.

When it arrived, she sank her teeth into her burger gustily, sitting beside the man she loved who loved her in return, across from her best friend and his fiancé, the world around her drowned out by the elation inside her.

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“You call me so many sweet things, do you wish I’d call you something besides Ben?” Rey asks him as they strip layers off and move towards one another on her bed after returning from dinner.

“No way,” Ben tells her, “I want you to say my name. It reminds me who I am. And that you want me, the real me. And it sounds hot as fuck coming out of your pretty, little mouth when I’m making you come,” he tells her, his mouth already on her skin, moving along her throat, his hands refamiliarizing themselves with her naked body, the dinner outing having kept them under wraps for entirely too long.

Rey moans, realizing that many hours were too many to stay controlled around Ben, even if it was less than three, and he tells her over and over, “I love you, Rey, I love you,” as he takes her to bed.

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“Ben,” Rey says quietly, staring into one another’s eyes, face to face later, “tell me what happened the other night,” she requests, mentioning his arrest.

“Baby, I wish I could,” he answers her, “I can’t fucking remember too much.”

Rey sighs and reaches to run her fingers through his hair, scraping his scalp with her short nails, making her way around his darling ears, his strong neck, his sweet face.

“I was upset,” he begins, taking a deep breath, “I thought I had let you slip through my fingers again. I couldn’t get you to respond to me and as the day went on I just…I don’t know, I just fucking panicked,” he explained.
“I’m so sorry, Ben, I’m so sorry…” she interrupts.

“Rey, no, it’s ok, it’s not your fault. We need to be able to have a fight without me losing control and getting shit-faced and blacking out,” he tells her, shaking his head emphatically where he lays.

“I know,” she says, “but, I didn’t play fair, ignoring you and making decisions for us both like that. That wasn’t fair to you. It was just me trying very hard to protect myself from you never really wanting me. And it broke me pushing you away like I did, Ben, it broke me,” she says, her turn to confess.

Ben takes a minute to kiss her, looks into her eyes while he touches her face and pulls her head onto his chest, pulling her close.

“I knew on some level, baby doll, I knew,” he tells her, “I know your story and I know this is hard for you. I just think I hadn’t been honest with you about how much I was invested in us and I was scared all of a sudden I had missed my chance and you were going to disappear. It was like seeing those fucking elevator doors close in my face again.”

They are both silent for a minute, remembering that moment as it swells and ebbs and leaves them again, legs twisting around one another to secure themselves as they recall it.

“I had talked to Gun the night before, when you were at Rose’s and I was a fucking mess, Rey, I was fucking coming apart at the seams thinking I’d lost you, again, and he had really good advice, you know? He told me to just stay the course, hold the line, steady on…and that was working, I could do that. Until I woke up the next morning and I started spiraling again. I spent all day trying to get my head right, tried to keep control. And then, after I worked out and I was still tense I thought I would just have a couple drinks, just calm my nerves, and before I knew it, I had been drinking since 10 and it was 5 pm and I had to get to the premier. All I remember is getting behind the wheel. Stupidest fucking decision of my fucking life. I thank God in heaven I didn’t fucking kill anyone because God knows I could’ve. Next thing I know, I’m sobering up in the L.A. county jail, and Hux bailed me out and dropped me off at my house, fucking ballistic and losing his mind at me, all enraged and screaming and bright red, head to toe. I slept it off, I just jumped on a plane, and I got to you. To my sanity. My girl. Shit, I didn’t even know if you’d let me in the door when I showed up, Rey, but, you did. You brought me back to life. You saved me. You revived me,” he tells her, having tilted her chin up so he could look her in the eyes, as he finished.

Rey has tears in her eyes and she can only think a handful of things outside of thank you, God, because she knows it could have just as easily been Ben’s life potentially lost, so, so easily, and she would never have forgiven herself, or him, or God and she just tells him what she can eek out which is, “Ben, I love you. I love you so much.”
She squeezes the tears back into her eyes and holds his biceps tight in her hands and rubs her cheek against his skin and listens as he continues.

“I grew up with way too much money, way too much access to any and every kind of shit you can imagine. Pot, coke, speed, you name it and I could get my hands on it. And, I did, for a while as a teenager with two parents who couldn’t be bothered to stay on the same continent as one another let alone their son. I dabbled in all manner of shit and when I finally got clean, I retained alcohol as a reward for myself. Ya know? Like, a behavior management system or something. I’ve been clean for nine years but not sober necessarily for any,” he tells her, his hands still and wide on her back, sealing her to his chest.

“And then, I loved being a Marine, ya know? I fucking loved it. I learned how to be a man. How to be a friend. How to have people you’d die for, take a bullet for, be in a foxhole with. But, I drank like a fish in the military, we all did, like it was fucking going out of style, and I think I’ve been a very functional drunk ever since.”

This is a major confession and Rey knows it.

She holds very still, aware he needs the space to get this out of his system.

“Do you…” he starts and hesitates, “want to take back any confessions of love, now that you know I’m just a lousy drunk?” his eyes are wet and wide, his voice threatening to quiver.

Rey sits up and looks at him in the face, taking his face in her hands.

She kisses him, kisses him soft and then hard, moves to straddle him, push him backward, devour his mouth and convince him.

“Ben,” she says, breathless but, fearless, “I love you. I am so fucking in love with you. Let me show you,” kissing his lips, running her hands over his chest and shoulders as she sits up tall above him, taking all he has to give her, righting herself above him, filled and strong, every wave, every surge a promise, an oath, a declaration filling his eyes with wonder and her spirit with resolve.

She does this to him, she gives this to him, she means this to him, she knows.

He reaches up for her and praises her and worships her body and she smiles at him with mischief in her eyes, a tower of confidence and beauty, Venus to his Adonis, proud to know herself to be what this beautiful man of hers needs.
He can’t take it, he’s helpless, alive and shaking and untied and spent into her, and she is pleased, so pleased.

They love each other, secure in it now, and it is Christmas and the world is reborn and all is well and right.

It is the second night Rey falls asleep in the arms of a man who smells like a fantasy, who holds her like a dream come true, who loves her like no one ever has before.

It is her reality and she is new.

She is loved, safe, empowered, and she has need of no book, no movie, no proverb or adage or lyric or platitude as the December cold descends further in the dark outside and Rey falls asleep in Ben’s arms.

******
Return

Chapter Summary

CHOOOOO
CHOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

moodboard by the genius rileybabe
beta’d by the extraordinary uselessenglishmajor

True North Chapter 4, Ben's POV drops tomorrow Tues, 4/24

xoxo
"Then let my winds caress thee —

Thy comrade let me be —

Since naught beside can bless thee

Beau Taplin || The veteran.

THE NORTH SHO
CHAPTER 9: RETURN
A slow smile spread across Rey’s face as she woke feeling Ben’s hand brushing her hair behind her ear as she opened her eyes.

“The fuck?” he said, his head jerking in the direction of the door.

“Dunno,” Rey said, reaching up to kiss him, attempting to block her morning breath from leaving her lips, withdrawing to pull on her cozy robe, tying it around herself.

“God, I love your body,” he said adoringly, lazily propping both hands behind his head where he remained in bed, smiling at her from the pillows, clearly enjoying the view.

Rey smiled at him, finished wrapping herself in her robe and leaned over him to kiss him more fully just because she could, just because every time she felt a whisper of insecurity erect a boundary for herself, he somehow managed to pulverize it and replace it with a river of confidence in her, seeing the praise and yearning for her in his eyes.
“I’ll go see what’s up,” she told him, feeling his attempt to pull her closer to himself, even as she braced one foot on the floor and one knee on the bed beside him.

“They’ll go away,” he argued, “probably the mailman,” he suggested, hopefully, slipping his hand into her robe.

“At nine in the morning?” she asked, pushing back from his pecs with both palms.

She listened to him murmur something filthy and appreciative at her backside as she sauntered away, intentionally suggestive, sending him a wicked smile over her shoulder as she left the room, and then hurried across the floor of the living room to the door, suddenly realizing how loud the hammering at her door was, hoping her neighbors were all absent.

The angry redhead from the coffee shop, Armie Hux, glaring in all his fuming glory, and Malaak, the bodyguard angel covered in tattoos, stood at Rey’s door looking cold, uptight and annoyed, staring back at her as Rey opened the door.

A blast of arctic wind blew through her as she took them in and it was more an attempt to keep the breeze from freezing her solid and whipping her robe open than hospitality when she heard herself say, “come in, come in”, widening the door so they could slip inside.

Hux eyed her head to toe, sneered and didn’t move an inch until after he’d crisply intoned an unmistakably nasty, “nice” with a disparaging eye roll.

Mal kept his eyes moving side-to-side while they stood on the stoop and only looked at Rey somewhere around her ear or her eyebrow once he stepped inside.

“How about Solo!” Hux bellowed through the small apartment.

Rey tightened her robe’s belt and drew her arms around herself tightly, all the warmth of the last ten hours evaporating with their presence, all her body heat escaping from the slit of her robe at her shins and out her feet on her cool parquet wood flooring under her.

Hux tore his thin black leather gloves away angrily, nostrils flaring and gelled hair solidly in place as he shouted: “Solo, get the fuck out here before I come drag you out here by the ball sack!”

Mal cracked his neck side-to-side deeply as he arranged his gloved hands clasped together in front of himself, shoulders back, silent as a tomb.
“How did you find where I live?” Rey asked Hux, still recovering from the shock of his presence, disappointment settling over her like a shroud.

“Oh please,” Hux spit disgustedly, rolling his eyes again. “I knew where to look once I knew he’d gone slumming,” he scoffed.

Ben emerged from the bedroom, jeans applied but shirtless, running both hands through his hair, barefoot and wide-eyed.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked, clearly unprepared for the intrusion.

“Don’t fucking play games, Solo. The plane leaves in an hour and a half. Get your shit and hurry the fuck up,” Hux demanded, pulling his gloves on again.

Ben stood motionless, brow furrowed, concentrating and processing.

Rey looked at all three men and settled her eyes on Ben.

She felt the tension in the room ratchet up as the seconds dragged on and tightened her arms around herself again, remembering she was naked under her robe and realized it made her feel all the more exposed, as if she had something to be ashamed about, as if she’d been caught compromised with a teenaged neighbor boy instead of the love of her life as grown, consenting adults.

“Hux, calm down,” Ben said, crossing his own arms over his chest, pecs flexing and bicep tattoo bulging.

“Calm down,” Hux repeated, a smirk on his face and a chuckle escaping as he turned to scan the room, trying to catch Mal’s eye conspiratorially as if to share a joke, while Mal looked at the floor.

“Calm down,” he repeated another time before exploding, “that’s great, Solo, that’s just great. ‘Calm down’, eh? Yeah. Calm down. As if that’s what is needed right now is fucking calm.” His face was reddening again as he took a menacing step towards Ben, who stood towering over him, chest up and eyes roving over the man who approached.

“Let’s review, shall we?” Huh exclaimed, turning and dumping his gloves on the small coffee
table, after ripping them off.

“Because calm is definitely not what is called for here. Not when you got falling-down drunk five days ago, so helplessly shit-faced off your ass you got the fucking Los Angeles Police Department to arrest you and haul your worthless, junkie ass to the county jail. Not when you destroyed your contract-mandated appearance at your own star-studded fucking premier of your own fucking headlined movie and pissed off the most powerful studio head in America so that I’ve had to listen to four days’ worth of threats about it. Not when you unceremoniously fled the state of California without so much as a ‘here’s where I’m going, Hux’ or ‘call you when I get there, Hux’ or a fucking ‘get me a good goddamn attorney, would you please, Hux, because I sure fucking need one’ before coming down to the deep south to have a fucking roll in the hay with your ‘Flavor of the Month’, here,” motioning to Rey with a flick of his wrist towards her.

“Watch your fucking mouth!” Ben shouted at Hux, still frozen in place, moving his arms from across his chest, one fisted at his side, the other pointing a finger at Hux’s chest threateningly.

Mal took half a step towards Hux’s back, closer to Rey and shot her a look to gauge her face.

Rey was still, observing, feeling the torrent of accusation, guilt, responsibility wash over her like a tidal wave.

All the repercussions of Ben’s DUI, all the pleasure of the last two days, all the things she hadn’t thought through, hadn’t let herself think about - his actions, the consequences, his arrival here, his pending assumed departure back to the west coast - it flooded her with a chill and a sobering, devastating accuracy.

She felt her bubble of their sweet time together burst into a wet pop of amusement, suddenly ashamed of her unconscious suspension of reality the last couple days.

She felt like a young and stupid accomplice to Ben’s undoing.

“You,” Hux began again, each word clipped with aggression, chosen artfully to do the most possible damage, “are going to get your fucking things. You are going to get on that fucking plane strapped into your little, fucking seat belt like the little bitch child that you are, and you are going back to California if I have to push your sorry ass all the fucking way there myself with my bare hands. You are going to show up at Snoke’s office with me and beg the studio to save your fucking contract before you put a thousand people out of a job with your selfish antics. And then you are going to meet with every single goddamn lawyer, every judge, and every fucking mother against drunk driving I tell you to, until you satisfy every, single one of the demands your disgusting little performance has necessitated.”
Rey’s heart sank as she watched the wind die from Ben’s eyes, watched his fervor dissipate, his shoulders relax into submission and his hands go flat against his thighs.

Knowing he’d won the argument, Hux moved a step closer, his cold voice intimidating, even if Ben loomed over him.

“I will save your ass this time, Solo, because it’s what you fucking pay me to do. No one else maybe, will lift a finger to help the golden boy but, I will, even if I know you’re the mediocre actor son of two washed-up, useless actors who come from a long line of washed-up, useless actors but, I’ll tell you this much: your fans? The ones who you depend on to support this life of leisure you lead, this type of existence that gives you the money to drop a dime and fly the coop and shack up with your little ‘arm candy’ here? They’ve all been posting photos of you surrounded by pitchers of beer at a bar since last night, all over the internet, and for you? For someone currently on probation for a DUI, with a suspended license? It does not bode well for you, I’ll tell you that much, it does not bode well.”

He emphasizes these final three words as nails in a coffin, sealing Ben’s choices and ending both his tirade and Ben’s time at Rey’s house, she is sure.

After a moment, Ben turns silently to the hallway and stops, saying “give me ten minutes,” without turning around and disappears into the bedroom alone.

Rey feels bile rise in her throat, hot and burning and urgent and she fights it down.

“You’re a pig,” she tells Hux, sizzling with rage.

With the goal to look unamused, Hux looks Rey up and down again, and raise his eyebrows in an unimpressed scowl.

“You want to fuck Kylo Ren? This is the package deal that comes with it, sweetheart,” he says, heading for the door.

“That’s not Kylo Ren, you prick, that’s Ben Solo and you are an asshole,” she informs him hotly, her face burning.

“I am an asshole, and I am his manager and that’s what I’m doing. Managing him. This business will chew you up, spit you out and flay you alive without thinking twice about it and I’m keeping that from happening to him so fast it’ll make your head spin. And if you knew what was good for you, you’d sit down and shut up, and let him do his fucking job so he can keep buying you
whatever pretty things he’s given you, ‘Little Miss Chattahoochie’,” he tells her, enjoying the way it takes her aback to hear the insult. “That's what they’re calling you, you know. In the media.”

Rey is dumbstruck, the knowledge landing on her she’s not only identified and gossiped about but nicknamed by the press.

“Tell your precious princess goodbye and be outside in five minutes flat, Solo,” Hux shouts to the room behind him as he steps through the front door and leaves it standing open behind him, the icy breeze blowing inside immediately.

Mal follows him, throwing Rey a sideways glance and reaching towards her arm as if to comfort but stops short, instead grimacing his mouth into a tight horizontal line and shaking his head slightly before leaving and closing the door behind him.

Rey catches her breath and hurries to the bedroom where she see Ben bent over the foot of the bed, his back to her, dressed in a shirt above his jeans already, hurriedly repacking his backpack, which makes her abruptly burst into a sob and bury her face in her hands.

All the liability, all the burden of it, all her sorrow at the shattered privacy they’ve shared erupts into a torrent of sadness and she buries her face in her robe sleeves.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Ben hears her and says, turning to sit at the edge of the bed, pulling her by the elbows towards him, between his spread knees. He pulls her arms from her face and wipes her tears away with his thumbs and wraps his arms around her bottom, pulling her helplessly closer and she continues to cry.

“Baby doll,” he croons at her, imploringly, “don’t. Hey, it’s ok, it’s ok,” he tells her as she stops heaving sobs but, stand before him, powerless to stop the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Hey, I’m sorry he’s such a dick, he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about,” Ben says, clearly misunderstanding and thinking this is all about Rey’s hurt feelings over Hux’s adept insults.

She shakes her head and puts her hands on his shoulders, lets herself be embraced and sniffls, “he really is,” she agrees, still trying to understand how he could speak so cruelly to herself, let alone to Ben.

“He’s not wrong though,” Ben tells her, his brown eyes fathomless and determined, “I do need to get my shit together. A lot of people depend on the trickle-down of the money, and I’m not holding
up my end of the bargain,” he shakes her by the hips a little to encourage them both with the truth of this. “I hate it, beautiful, but he’s right. I gotta go.”

Rey cries fresh tears. She hates feeling this attached, this forlorn, this dramatic but, she’s unable to make the tears stop, somehow, no matter how much she wills them to do so.

“I know,” she nods, wiping tears, “I just…I’ll miss you,” she struggles to get out.

“Oh Rey,” he frowns, his eyes darting back and forth between hers, and then lighting up with an idea, “come with me!” he shouts.

“What?” Rey asks, shocked and feeling her tears pause.

“Come with me!” he repeats, “Pack a bag, or don’t, who cares, I’ll buy whatever you want, and I’ll grab you a ticket when we get to the airport and you just come with me, right now. Come on, right now, say yes!”

She can tell he’s got excitement enough for them both but, she immediately decides that will never work.

She has the Resistance to think about and her life is right here, on this frozen, wintery Tennessee River shore but, she’s never been in love before and certainly not with a California-born man, and she’s never been more tempted.

“Ben,” she says, offering him all the warmth she has inside her, tenderly stroking her fingers through his hair to his scalp, “I can’t,” she says honestly. “I have the Resistance. And responsibilities. I can’t just drop everything and hop on a plane,” she tells him, sadness seeping into his eyes.

They both just sit still a minute, feeling the certainty of her words and understanding them to make sense, but Rey can’t help but feel the urge to fucking be reckless and let herself be swept away. It wouldn’t take her too much convincing right now to make a careless, daredevil choice and just leave with him, find a way, bask in the west coast heat, fill herself up on her man and shut her ears to anything sensible but, she knows all about brokenness and she can’t take risks like that if she wants to remain someone who doesn’t need rescuing.

She has to remain.

She cannot require rescue, sometimes rescue never comes.
*Remain secure by eliminating risk,* she mandates herself.

“Rey, I love you,” Ben affirms, pulling her close and looking deeply at her, “you pieced me back together.”

Rey just shakes her head at him miserably, lowers her forehead to his shoulder and closes her eyes.

“I know what I have to do,” he tells her, “you make me strong enough to do it all.”

Rey squeezes fresh tears away behind her closed eyes. Leaning back to look at him again he says, “I’ll text you in a little bit. Okay? Will you be okay?”

She nods and leans to kiss him.

“SOLO!” they hear Hux scream from the living room, and then the door slam shut again.

“I love you,” Rey says, and kisses him again.

“Oh - here,” he says, handing her the acia bead necklace from the night of Paige’s party, “I’ll miss these but, I’ll be back.” kissing her forehead as she stuffs them into her robe pocket, deciding to wait to have feelings about them until after he’s gone, unwilling to think about anything but his imminent departure right now.

“I love you.”

It’s the last thing they say to one another, the last words he says as he kisses her at the door twice, once with his arms around her, pulling her close, squeezing her ass, and once with her face in his hands, and a wink afterward as he walks away.

He’s seated inside Hux’s rental car and gone before Rey can breathe normally again, and she closes the front door to a world of resounding, deafening silence.

She has no idea when she’ll see him again, no idea of his return, no clue how to move forward.
It’s been such a painful, horrifying whirlwind and when she sits on the couch, unready to head towards the bed where she can still envision Ben’s huge form, she pulls out the necklace and studies it, imagining it in Ben’s hands these last six months, his eyes on it, and as she lifts her eyes she sees Hux’s black, leather gloves still on the coffee table, a remnant of the excruciating morning event she has just survived and she fell alone, curled onto her couch, where she had first climbed onto Ben’s lap when he arrived two days earlier, a fitting receptacle for all the tears she was about to shed.

******

To: Rey
From: Ben
10:09 am
Boarding now, beautiful.
Thank you for the best two days.
I’ll call you tonite. It’s all going to be ok, baby doll.
I know it - I promise.
I love you!

To: Ben
From: Rey
10:10 am
I love you, Ben.

******

“He called you what ?!” Rose exclaims, seated on the floor of Resistance as the sun sets outside the storefront window, her legs falling straight in front of her where she’s had them pulled up tightly against her, listening to Rey recap her morning.

“‘Little. Miss. Chattahoochie,’ ” Rey recounts, making her “t’s” snap, “and ‘flavor of the month’. And ‘arm candy’, I believe.”
“Ugh, what a piece of work!” Rose groans, getting a feel for who Hux was.

“You should have heard how he spoke to Ben, Rosie,” Rey says, sadly, miserably, “it was demoralizing. Hateful. Downright destructive.”

Rose shakes her head at Rey, mirroring the devastated look on Rey’s face.

“That’s a shame,” Rose says. “Ben probably doesn’t know to expect more from people. Imagine living a life where someone can talk to you that way. You’d start to believe that’s what you’re worth.”

Rey sighs, her heart hurting for her man, so far away and under the control of such a heartless bastard.

“Yeah, and I am sure I don’t know the half of it,” Rey says, realizing the truth as she speaks it. “That’s just one Hollywood asshole.”

“Well, you just keep being the Rey of hope we all know you to be, Ben will be a better man for it,” Rose says, encouragingly.

“You’ve been so forgiving, Rose,” Rey tells her, realizing she hasn’t really had a chance to ask forgiveness for keeping a secret so big it felt like an outright, overt lie for months.

“I’m sorry I kept it from you,” Rey says.

“Reyrey, hey. It’s ok,” Rose says. “I’ve never had something like that happen to me…ya know, like what’s happened to you and I don’t know that I would’ve done anything differently.”

“What do you mean?” Rey says, “you’ve got Gun. You know what it’s like to fall in love.”

“Yeah but, I mean, what its like to fall in love with a celebrity. All the crap that comes with it. Ya know, the paparazzi, the journalists, the photographers - all the glitz and glamour. I don’t know what that’s like.”

Rey feels her heart stop.
It’s been quite a while since she’s thought of Ben as a celebrity, and since he’s spent the better part of the last several months seeking her on her own terms whether online, long-distance or even now in person, it’s always been the real Ben, not “Ben Solo, Hollywood Idol & Heir to a Cinematic Legacy” whom she’d grown to love and have a relationship with.

Somehow, the reality that Rey is in love with someone whom the public will stalk hits her full-force.

In the bottom of her mind, a hushed voice cups a hand to her ear and hums a suggestion of full retreat.

“Rosie, come here,” she says, directing her best friend to the computer at the countertop beneath the Resistance princess poster, “pull up Perez Hilton,” she says, going to grab an additional stool from the storeroom and bringing it to the counter, to look at the computer together.

There, in bright colors against the pink backdrop of the website are photos of Ben and Rey, seated across from Finn and Poe at North Shore Grill from last night, laughing over burgers and chips, pitchers of beer on the table before them, plenty of large amber-tinted cups lining the table between the four of them.

He’s scrawled the word “DADDY” and a heart above Ben’s head and “GOLD-DIGGER???” above Rey’s in crude white ink, and sure enough, the words “Little Miss ChattaHOOCHIE” accompany Rey’s caption.

Across the top of the page are the words:

**Kylo Ren star Ben Solo and Unnamed Woman DRUNK after his DUI!**

The article below the photo incorrectly listed a number of details, including plenty of wrong information but, it’s clear the damage has been done. These photos of Ben look fairly innocuous, including the selfies he had agreed to take with the blondes at the restaurant that night which are also present on the website but, in addition to the captions claiming his drunkenness and the inclusion of his recent DUI just days before, the beer pitchers Poe and Finn had ordered make it all look very convincing.

Rey sighs and nods to Rose who is snarling at the computer, shaking her head and tsking her tongue.

“Try USMagazine,” Rey prompts, nodding at the mouse for Rose to find the next website.
Sure enough, the story is covered there, even if it's with a slightly less gratuitous and more hypothetical headline, as well as several other sites they flit through until Rose clicks off the computer and gives a heavy sigh.

“Disgusting,” Rose proclaims, labeling the entire venture. “How do you feel?” she asks Rey, seeing her friend wide-eyed, mildly stunned.

“Misunderstood,” she groans, dropping her head to her forearms on the counter and murmuring from there, “and I want Ben.”

Rose leans over and scratches her back, just the way she knows Rey likes, and she sighs deeply again.

“Come on,” Rose says to her friend, without seeing her face, “let’s go eat dinner. Gun’s making spaghetti and meatballs at home.”

Rey drags herself up and whines noisily, giving herself permission to be a caricature of herself in front of her best friend, letting her head loll backward, whimpering and grousing like a toddler as loudly as she wants, while she prepares to leave for the night, grabbing her bag and keys and making sure she has everything locked up before heading to Rose’s, arm in arm.

******

Rey eats dinner at Rose’s and humors her and Gun with a stable mood throughout, thankful she isn’t alone but quickly takes Gun up on the offer to drive her back home as soon as it’s over, piling into his cruiser after hugging Rose goodnight.

“Thanks for the ride,” she tells him, during the quick, six-minute car ride to her apartment.

“No problem,” Gun tells her, “it’s cold as wiz out. And your man asked me to make sure you got home okay.”

“What?” Rey asks, looking at him as he steered the car.

“Texted me,” he explained, “wanted to be sure you didn’t walk home in the dark,” he says.
Rey smiles out the window beside her.

*He loves me,* she thinks, watching the dark North Shore glide by.

“I think he also didn’t want you alone and sad tonight, if you ask me,” Gun adds.

“I didn’t know you two text,” Rey mentioned.

“You’ve got yourself a good man there, Rey,” Gun nodded, his mouth set into a straight line. “I’m not saying he’s perfect. Hell, no one is, definitely not me, that’s for damn sure but, he’s a good one alright,” he says, his drawl emerging.

“He is,” she says, knowing it, feeling her words throb painfully in her heart, missing him acutely, opening the door to climb out of the car as he parks at her apartment.

“Thanks, Gun,” she says, leaning back into the car.

“I’ll watch till you get inside,” he tells her, nodding up towards her apartment door.

Rey smiles and gives a little wave goodbye to the car as she unlocks her door, and starts to feel herself greet the sad ghost of Ben’s loss when her phone lights up with an incoming FaceTime request.

*Ben is calling…*

Immediately she accepts and brightens instinctively, walking through her house depositing her bag, her keys, her boots, her scarf, everything she doesn’t need with Ben’s presence to warm her, even through her phone screen.

“Ben!” she says, as soon as they’re connected, as soon as she sees him. It feels like an eternity, instead of twelve hours since he was here with her, kissing her and asking her to come with him.
Why had she said no, again?

“Hey, baby,” he says, his voice a balm to her loneliness, his face the best thing she’s ever seen.

“Oh,” she whines, throwing her head backward again in a whiney complaint, “this is definitely going to make my life harder now, isn’t it, now that I’ve had you here and you’re gone again?” she complains, knowing it to be true.

The treat of unrestricted access to him for two plus days has spoiled her to the point of no return, she realizes.

“Fuck,” he says, “no kidding. And you don’t know the half of it. I had to spend the day trapped on a plane, buckled in beside fucking Hux,” he says with an exhale.

They stare at one another until Rey smiles.

“God, I miss you,” she says, “I can’t believe you’re so far away already.”

“Yeah, this feels a little like torture,” he says, and then adds, “I miss you. I miss your lips and your arms and your taste and your gorgeous legs. I missed you all day, worse every hour on that plane.”

Rey props her head on her hand and tells him drearily, “me too. And, how you smell. Especially how you smell. I don’t know how to do without it.”

“Baby, I am going to make this work,” he tells her, “I don’t want you worrying. We belong together, Rey, I know it, and I am going to get my shit buckled up and get this thing on the road. Okay? I have a plan, baby doll,” he smiles at her.

"Okay?" he asks her. "You believe me?"

She nods.

“I love you,” he says, while she absorbs it all, waiting for her heart to believe it all, waiting to feel confirmation she deserves this, she won’t lose this when all she feels is far from him and sad.

“Give me a smile. Tell me you love me back.”

Rey smiles back, “Ben, I love you so much,” she tells him.
This though, she knows how to do, listen to his voice and see his face and feel herself get pulled along in the tide of loving him and wanting him till it drowns her, trying not to hate his job, his career, his heritage, his profession, his home.

It’s not nearly enough to keep her warm when she goes to sleep that night, a little while later, though, in a robe and socks pulled up to her knees underneath a pile of blankets, trying to duplicate the feeling of sleeping with Ben behind her by propping a line of pillows at her back.

She tells herself there’s always something to be grateful for, and hope springs eternal, and springtime follows winter, and never, ever, ever give up, and whatever souls are made of, his and mine are the same but, the tears slip out the corners of her eyelids all the same and dry in salty ribbons on her cheeks as she falls asleep alone.

******
Reminding

Chapter Summary

this is a beast of a lengthy chapter.

moodboard by the supremely amazing rileybabe
beta'd by the wonderfully constant uselessenglishmajor

Ben's POV, True North Chapter 5 tomorrow, Tuesday, May 1

xo
Her hand in his, he became her tomorrows.

Atticus

“Touch me, remind me who I am.”

- Stanley Kunitz
There it was, greeting her as the sun peaked through the mini-blinds of her bedroom, Ben’s text awaiting her when she woke.

*Good morning, beautiful. I love you.*

Rey sighed deeply, clutched her phone to her heart as she smiled with eyes squeezed shut, and she mentally sent Ben a smile, though she knew it was too early for him to be waking in California.

*Good morning, I love you back,* she typed, alongside a kissing emoji, the text there to greet him in return when he woke as hers had been.

It was cold this first week of December, and Ben’s departure two days earlier felt so long ago already, it was almost like his whole visit had been a dream, a beautiful fantasy she woke from to find the frigid temperatures of winter wickedly reminding her of her solitude.

Rey was heartened every time she saw a text from him, every time he FaceTime’d her, relieved to see his name on her phone affirming she hadn’t imagined the entire thing.

She ran to the bathroom, turning the shower water as hot as possible to thoroughly steam the room, escaping in a sprint back to the warmth of her bed while the bathroom fogged behind the closed door, huddling to rub her feet together under her nest of blankets while she texted Rose and Paige.

To: Rose, Paige
From: Rey
7:04 am
Need Sushi Night.
Wed? 6?
-Reyrey

To: Rey, Paige
From: Rose
7:06 am
I’m IN.
- Rosie
Rey charged the bathroom again, barricaded in the smoky warmth of a heated shower and moved forward to greet her day, pleasantly and adamantly refusing to remember Ben’s body in the shower beside her days earlier. She’d rather save that memory for later and take it to bed with her in the dark.

She dressed sensibly, deciding no matter what she wore, it would be covered with a fleece and scarf anyhow, and she grabbed her keys, messenger bag, mug of coffee, homemade banana muffin and her phone to head to the Resistance to open for the day.

Ben was texting her, probably from his bed which pierced her heart but, she smiled brightly as she read his words, walking to Resistance in the December gray morning, telling her he missed her in bed with him, he missed her face and her lips and her sweet, little ass, telling her he had meetings today, with Hux and Snoke and an attorney, and reminding her again he loved her.

She was texting him back this was a normal weekday for her, too and she was heading into the Resistance and she missed his gorgeous, sexy, super strong arms like mad, and maybe he should screen test for the Man of Steel with those arms instead of Batman when she heard her name being shouted, a rush of noise like the roar of a crowd, jolting her from her private texting conversation with Ben, nearly making her jump out of her skin.

“Rey! Rey! Rey! Rey!”

“Where’s Ben, Rey?”

“How long have you been sleeping with Ben Solo?”

“Rey, how long have you known Ben?”

“What’s Ben’s next project gonna be, Rey?”

“Have you talked to Ben, Rey?”

"How long has Ben been an alcoholic, Rey?"

"Did you know Ben Solo was an alcoholic before you started fucking him, Rey?"
“Give us a smile!”

"Rey, where's Ben Solo?"

"Hey, Miss Chattahoochie, over here!"

“Tell us how he is, Rey!”

“Rey, how’s Ben?”

It was all she could do to push through the cameras as they snapped mercilessly, clicking a mile a minute, while she carried her keys defensively shielding her face, and managed to unlock the door of the store before she gratefully fell over the threshold, catching her breath, slamming the front door behind her.

She threw all her belongings onto the counter, heaving and slowly looked up as she regained her normal heart rate, her eyes falling on the princess holding the blaster, keeping watch over the Resistance from her perch on the poster above the register.

_Holy hell, she thought, you’ve done this for how many years? How have you survived this? _she silently asked the princess in white.

“The _fuck_?” she heard Finn’s voice, as he stumbled through the front door a moment later, forcibly retaining the safety of the store by holding back the tide of photographers outside the door. “Guess they found you, huh?” he asked Rey, shaking the wrinkles from his manhandled jacket, the shouts of the photographers dwindling outside.

“Guess so,” Rey sighed. “How long you think this will go on?” she wondered out loud.

Finn just shook his head and raised an eyebrow. “I dunno, you’re the one dating the famous dude. How long has this gone on for Ben? I’m guessing forever?”

Rey’s heart sank, knowing that had to be right until her phone illuminated once more.

To: Rey

From: Ben

9:03 am

FaceTime you tonight, baby doll.
There was no way not to smile at that.

Paparazzi or no, Rey smiled to herself while Finn shook his head at the noise outside, and they both wondered how they would ever make money again.

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In the movies, Christmastime is a wintry wonderland.

A white and fluffy landscape, always plenty of thick, frosted smoky mountaintops and wisps of curling smoke escaping cozy mountain cabin chimneys, baked good and basted turkeys adorning overflowing tables of confectionery delights crafted by loving, apron-adorned grandmothers with greying hair in a messy bun and warm hands to assist in cookie construction.

In the movies, Santa is never late, family connections are of utmost importance and magic is universal.

There are carols to sing, parties to attend, and gifts to share with your favorite people.

Ebenezer Scrooge always wakes Christmas morning with a regenerated heart, Kevin McCallister’s parents always come home from Paris in time for Christmas morning, and the Grinch’s heart always grows three sizes.

Everything is fixed in under two hours, all is well and all is bright.

That would have been enthralling.

This year however, the hardest part of the holiday season wasn’t the fact none of that was Rey’s real life. In past years, the hardest part of work at Resistance was remembering titles, calling people who were delinquent to kindly request copies of films returned, and manning a busier time of the year in the front of the store.

This year the hardest part was avoiding the cameras outside of her building each day she arrived, sneaking in through the back door of Resistance wearing dark sunglasses, trying to ditch paparazzi flashbulbs, evade shouted questions about Ben and herself, trying to decipher which customers were actually interested in renting and which just wanted a glimpse of Ben Solo’s “southern distraction”, as one publication described Rey uncharitably.

It ended up just feeling exhausting.

In the movies, Rey would have left work in the evenings and rushed home to a house bustling with people she loved who belonged to her, stacking an additional, professionally-wrapped box under the tree, cozying up to a blazing fire in the fireplace, putting her sock-covered toes on a cushion while she sipped hot chocolate.

That would have been picturesque.
This year however, she chanted to herself *the best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear*, and *’tis the season to be jolly*, and *fa la la la la* but, then *all I want for Christmas is you* sounded so profound she nearly cried hearing Mariah Carey croon overhead while ordering a peppermint latte at Maz’s Mug in mid-December, overwhelmed by missing Ben.

It ended up just feeling *pitiably*.

In the movies, there would be ice skating in Central Park and a parade of floats strung with colored lights down a Main Street somewhere, and a reindeer-pulled sleigh with a red-suited elf whose belly shook like a bowl full of jelly, along storefronts with frosted windows featuring nativity sets and bright-eyed children with visions of sugar plums dancing above their heads.

That would have been *idyllic*.

This year however, Rey changed her phone number and got everything in her name unlisted, took her last name off her mailbox, and made Finn man the counter at Resistance, trading him for back store room duty. She talked him into helping with the store’s social media interactions and answering phone calls at the store, and she begged him to create a diversion so she could run to the post office one afternoon when only two photographers were outside.

It ended up just feeling *illicit*.

Rey knew how to seek her own damn comfort and joy, after all, she always had before dammit, and she was determined to plow through the holidays merrily as always but, something about the nature of steaming through the season purposely was decidedly at odds with the nature of a magical Christmastime.

She knew each of the best holiday movies and she played them at The Resistance, normally informing customers of the titles of whichever cheerful holiday film was playing in the store, offering *Holiday Inn*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, *White Christmas*, *It’s A Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*, the *real* Miracle on 34th Street, the one starring a young Natalie Wood and Maureen O’Hara, grateful to have a bulk of December income arrive as the air chilled and the roads iced and people wanted something festive to watch while they holed up.

She bundled up when heading out, she established code words with her friends, she talked Kaydel into delivering her lattes from Maz’s so she could stay indoors during business hours and she bought the largest, darkest sunglasses she could find, shielding as much of her face and her life as she could.

It’s very hard to be jolly when your smile is emphatically plastered there in opposition to what you’re feeling instead of because of it.

It’s very hard to be merry when cameramen shout at you on a first name basis even if they are
strangers to you, when the media screams details about your childhood in foster care on gossip page headlines and the general public stalks your social media to comment on your looks, your career, your photos, and your love life.

It’s very hard to be festive when your boyfriend lives 2,165 miles away.

Rey showed up to Sushi Night mid-December with a frozen nose, an infinity scarf wet with drifting snowflakes and the sniffles, determined to lift her spirits manually with girl time after a weird day at Resistance.

“I’m not even trying to be jolly, forget it,” Paige said, chomping down a volcano roll at Thai Sushi with Rose and Rey one evening, mid-December, “I swear to God, my middle schoolers are basically trying to murder me with their laziness, it’s fucking colder than an Alaskan funeral and it’s depressing not having anyone to snuggle.”

Rey snorted and chose a spicy tuna roll. “It’s ‘colder than a witch’s tit’, I heard that one today,” she shared with a laugh.

Rose joined in, “my favorite has always been ‘colder than a ditch-digger’s butt crack’.”

Paige added, “I like this one: ‘colder than a pimp’s heart’,” which made them all howl although to be fair, they were each several sips of sake in.

“I’m just glad my kids are middle schoolers and they don’t get fucking recess anymore so I don’t have to stand on a playground and freeze my own butt crack off,” Paige said, digging through the sushi to find what she was after.

“I’d love some fresh air during the day,” Rey said, swallowing a gulp of wasabi-dipped volcano roll, “I’m trapped in the store all day, afraid for one of the photographers to ambush me.”

“Eff that,” Rose said, waving an empty chopstick around, “you effing own that store, they can eff off,” she announced.

Rey smiled at her best friend, Rose’s natural aversion for cursing in conflict with her protective reflexes towards Rey and her personal bent towards justice.
“Strong words, Rosie,” Paige teased Rose with a wink, grinning around her sushi, teasing her sister.

“You get more bees with honey than vinegar,” Rey recited, trying to remember not to stir a hornet’s nest or take the dog by the ears or the bull by the horns or some other animal analogy.

“Well, I don’t want honey or vinegar… or bees, I just want to be warm,” Paige said, “and those assholes who want to stand around and take pictures of you just walking in and out of a video store are morons if they don’t want to be warm, too. I swear to God,” Paige announced, popping a California roll in her mouth, “I’d flash ‘em.”

“What?! Oh my God,” Rey exploded a giggle at her, “Paige, I’m not going to lift my top and whip out my boobs because I’m being stalked by a couple of money-hungry bottom-dwellers!” Rey laughed.

“Yeah, then they’d think she really was the ‘Chattahoochie’,” Rose murmured, which, after a beat, made all three women fall apart in gales of laughter.

Sushi Night was a good idea and so far, the paparazzi hadn’t found her apartment.

Rey hurried home afterward to crawl into bed and see her man’s face on the screen of the phone he’d bought her months ago, before the cameras and the nicknames and the getaway visit and the love and she instantly remembered what all this was about.

“Hi,” she breathed, quickly locking her apartment door behind her, clicking her overhead lights off and pulling the covers up to her shoulders as she jumped into bed.

Ben’s face shined back at her from his sunny living room in California, the sliding glass door behind him pouring an abundance of sky blue sunshine around him, his feet up, long legs probably spanning the entire length of his couch.

“There’s my girl,” he said, with a smile, “where you been?” he asked, situating himself amongst his couch cushions.

“Dinner with Rosie and Paige,” she told him, “sushi. Girls night. Yum,” she bottom-lined for him, curling her shoulders inward, “What have you been up to?”

Ben gave an exhale, ran a hand over his face, “meetings all day,” he said, sounding tired, “the
studio and Hux and an attorney about the DUI and…I think I picked a project.”

“Really?” Rey asked, excitedly, “tell me! I mean… can you tell me?”

“Yes,” he chuckled, “I can. I just haven’t gotten details worked out completely yet but, I am going to screen test for a period piece, like someone I know suggested,” he tells her with a smirk. “Small budget, tiny production, very independent film vibe. Snoke is set to sign off. I am so stoked about it. And it’s thanks to you, baby doll.”

“No, no, no,” Rey said quickly, embarrassed, “it has nothing to do with me! Ben, you're so talented, it as only a matter of time before you branched out that way!”

“I’m telling you, it’s you, beautiful. You make everything better in my life. I also…I also went to an AA meeting today.”

Rey took the chance to encourage, careful not to project expectations, “oh Ben, I’m so proud of you,” she said, shoulders hunched and face bright, pride in him beaming from her eyes, “well done. You are amazing,” she announced, labeling him.

“I’m not, I’m not,” he insisted, “it as awkward as hell and I snuck out the back probably too fast when it was over. But, I went,” he told her.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, grateful to be face-to-face, even long-distance so she could show him with her eyes she meant it, instead of feeling rushed over a phone line to find words to express her admiration for and support of him. “You know I’d go with you if I was there,” she said.

“Everything would be easier if you were here,” he admitted, softly, and Rey’s heart soared.

“Everything would be easier together,” she says, thinking about the photographers and the bombarding questions, the cloud of confusion kicked up by their taunts and demands like a sand storm of things she hasn’t even been taught to handle.

“You got that right,” Ben says, “I can think of a whole lot of things that would be easier together,” he says suggestively, adding, “and not just that …my whole life, even back when I was discharged would have been so much easier if you were with me, baby.”
“Yeah,” Rey says, sighing. “Ben, there are photographers outside Resistance everyday now,” ready to share the burden with him, aware not only that if he loves her she should let him into her life, but also that he is a professional who knows how to do this and he could teach her.

“Shit,” he says, running a hand through his hair, “there are? Tell me.”

“They’re just…they’re just sort of camped out every morning. At Resistance. Calling my name. Asking about you. Acting like they know us when clearly they don’t. It’s not good for business. I feel…I feel sort of overwhelmed.”

“Baby, I’m so sorry…” he says, with a frustrated sigh, “I’m so sorry this is the bullshit that comes with being with me,” Ben tells her, and she can feel his agitation rising.

“Oh Ben, I don’t care I’m just not as good at handling it as you are,” she says, remembering the blondes at dinner who took photos with him, his naturally gracious agreement, his kindness to her and her circle of friends at Paige’s party months ago when all this started, before they knew and loved and trusted one another, how he was always kind, always polite, always collected even then.

“Well listen, all I care about is you being safe. Those assholes can be fucking shady. You tell them whatever the fuck you want, you say anything you want, baby, whatever or nothing at all, it won’t even matter, they’re scumbags and I don’t give a shit what you say or don’t say. I just want you safe. You hear me?” he’s getting a bit riled, Rey can tell, “and if anyone so much as lays a finger on you I swear to God, I’m going to break their fucking hands.”

“Okay, handsome, okay,” she says, knowing he has gone from 0-60mph in under a minute, watching his face cloud and his eyes heat up before simmering again.

She smiles at him to calm him a little and waits till his face relaxes.

“Ben, I…I sometimes feel like this is a dream,” she confessed, her turn to be vulnerable, “I feel like maybe I made it all up. Like, it’s too good to be true,” she says, biting her bottom lip when she’s done, furrowing her brow and looking at his face for answers.

“You tell me there are paparazzi hounding you at the store and I feel like shit for roping you into this circus and you still say it’s too good to be true,” he says, shaking his head, “Rey, you are heaven-sent to me, baby doll. You’re what’s too good to be true.”

She just smiles at him.
There’s no way to make him see how much she loves him, how many photographers she’d wade through to find him, how many taunts she’d shut her ears to, how she’s powerless to do anything but wait to see him, belong to him, love him. Even if it comes with this nonsense, she doesn’t want him to deal with it alone.

“Rey,” he says, serious, “Listen. I’ve been thinking, I have an idea. Come to Aspen for Christmas,” he says, answering her fears with an offer, taking a deep breath.

“I’m serious,” he says, sitting up straight when he sees her begin to resist, “I’ll be at my mom’s house. I’ll send you a ticket. All you have to do is just get on the plane and come meet me. We can ice skate and go skiing and sit by the fire and have sex and goddamn it …c’mon, please, Rey, say yes. Tell me yes.”

Rey tilts her head, “Ben…” she whines softly, thinking about how much money she’s hoping the store brings in by year end, about how much business Resistance could do the week between Christmas and New Year’s when people vacation and watch movies, how she can’t ski and hasn’t ever been to Colorado, and doesn’t even know what you wear in weather like that, and how she would possibly die if she had to come face-to-face with Leia Organa, especially if her hero knew Rey was sleeping with her son.

In her house.

She withers but as she watches his eyes, and hears Ben tell her, “just think about it,” she feels herself melt.

“I will,” she says.

Is she lying?

She can’t tell.

She knows she will think about it, she just doubts she will accept.

“I miss you like crazy,” she says, tracing his face with her finger on the screen.

“I miss you like a fat kid misses cake,” he tells her, playing her game.

“I miss you like an idiot misses the point,” she answers.

“I miss your eyes,” he says, “I can’t see all the little sparkly colors on the phone.”

“I miss your warmth,” she says, “it’s so cold and my bed feels empty all by myself.”

“I miss holding you,” he says, “and picking you up and kissing you whenever I want.”

“I miss that too,” she says, “I wish you were in bed with me here, now.”
“Fuck,” he says, “me too, baby, trust me. Me, too.”

After a beat, Ben asks, “you heading to sleep now?”

“I am,” she says, “I wish you were going to be here in this bed when I climb back in after I change my clothes.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, “are you not ready for bed already? Sitting in the dark under the covers like that?”

“Nope,” Rey says, throwing the covers down, exposing herself to the phone camera, still dressed head to toe in a sweater and jeans.

“Oh my God,” he laughs, his head tossed back, “baby, you are so cute, I was picturing your little naked self under there,” he’s cracking up at her.

“What!?” she shouts over his rolling laughter, feigning insult, “I wanted to hurry and answer the call, don’t laugh at me!” she’s defending her decision to climb into bed fully clothed, and he’s still laughing, hearing her argue, “I was cold!” over his crowing.

“I love you,” he says with a laugh and a sigh, “baby, you are what I need in my life Rey, you have no idea.”

“I love you back,” she says, chin resting on her knees, one hand curling her fingers over her toes.

“Think about Christmas?” he asks.

“Ben, you act like I can think about anything but you, ever,” she says, rolling her eyes emphatically.

“Tell me you love me again,” he demands, jutting his chin towards her.

“I love you,” she says, his amusement at her giving her courage to be honest, “I miss you and I dream about you and I love you.”

“I love you, Rey,” he says and blows a kiss off one index finger, “go to bed, crazy woman,” he shakes his head.

Rey blows her man a kiss from all her fingertips, and when she snaps off her bedside light a few minutes later, she is smiling to herself.

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Two mornings later, one of the photographers hands Rey a FedEx envelope from the store’s front step, either an act of chivalry or manipulation although, Rey suspects more the latter than the former considering the men routinely alternate between calling her “Rey” and “Miss Resistance” when they’re being kind and “Miss Chattahoochie” and “heyheyhey, lady” when they’re being less humane.

Rey takes a beat to look the man in the eye as the other photographers jostle for position to catch a glimpse of her, yelling questions her direction about Ben, his movie project choices, and their relationship, but, as she makes eye contact with him, she stills to tell the man a sincere but frigid “thank you” as she takes the package.

She could swear she sees beneath the veneer of professional voyeurism underneath to his humanity but, she moves inside the store by herself all the same as quickly as she can, leaving the din of paparazzi behind her.

Opening the FedEx envelope she realizes it’s an open-ended airplane ticket from Ben.

He sent me a plane ticket, she thinks, he really loves me. He wants me with him, even at Christmas, she realizes.

I could be with someone I love at Christmas, she thinks, her throat thick.

She replays Hux’s nasty accusations of Ben’s gifting her things.

She thinks about the websites theorizing about her being a gold-digger, and of her need to keep The Resistance in the black, and she tucks the ticket back into the envelope to consider later.

When Finn arrives, loudly exclaiming “move, move, get out of here, you pack of piranhas,” having grown accustomed to the photographers’ daily presence in front of the Resistance at opening, and bursts through the front door to the shop with a huff and a stack of business mail, Rey hides the FedEx envelope so he doesn’t see it and ask questions.

Good fences make good neighbors, she tells herself and decides to think about it alone, later.

She is still pondering and debating three days later when Ben texts her.

To: Rey
From: Ben
2:25 pm
Just left the meeting, it’s all nailed down.
Filming starts Jan 3rd in Canada, then
here in LA by Feb 1.
This is cuz of you, baby doll!

To: Ben
From: Rey
2:26 pm
Will I have to activate the bat signal
to get your attention?

To: Rey
From: Ben
2:27 pm
No but, maybe brush up on your Brontë.
Mr. Rochester is hoping you’ll come
have Christmas with him.

To: Ben
From: Rey
2:28 pm
Brontë? REALLY? GAH!
Amazing! I FREAKING CANNOT WAIT TO SEE THIS.
OMG, Ben Solo, I may claw you to actual shreds.
FAIR WARNING.

To: Rey
From: Ben
2:30 pm
See, I knew there was a reason
I took this role.

To: Ben
From: Rey
2:32 pm
Lord, as if it wasn’t bad already.
I’m ’bout to be hopelessly gone for you.
*eye roll*

To: Rey
From: Ben
2:33 pm
Listen, beautiful.
Get your sweet, little ass on a plane and
I’ll swipe the suit from wardrobe.

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Friday night arrived, icy sidewalks and grey skies and Rey headed to the movie theater with her troop of friends to see Ben on the big screen.

The Kylo Ren movie he had filmed over the summer in Tennessee when she’d met Ben for the first time, had opened a week prior and against her friends’ wishes, she had insisted they refrain from attending opening weekend in case anyone put two and two together and made a show of recognizing her at the movie theater.

Armed with popcorn and her trophy of a Cherry Coke the size of a small bathtub, Rey wedged herself between Paige and Poe mid-aisle, her stomach a churning tumble of feelings.

She had to remind herself she was only about to watch a movie, not really see her boyfriend, she was so anxious to spend time with him, but, as soon as the previews extinguished and the feature
began, she fell into step with everyone else watching and was obediently transported to Las Vegas, riding on the back of Kylo Ren’s motorcycle through the desert.

She was mesmerized.

Here was this man she knew and loved in real life, whose arms, hands, lips, eyes she knew by heart, and yet on a screen that loomed 20 feet above them all he was a completely different person.

Ben was nowhere to be found.

This was all Kylo Ren.

Kylo Ren donned his leather jacket, his helmet, his flinty visage, his hit-man persona and his bad guy swagger across the screen entrancing the crowd as he growled his way through enemies, clients and a love interest but, Rey looked at him and just deeply longed for Ben.

*Her* Ben, with his Marine tattoo hidden in the interior of his bicep, his precious need for absolution from alcohol, his vulnerable, aching words, his desire to please her and take her with his mouth in bed, his sense of humor that cracked up at the Marx brothers and Charlie Chaplin films, his messy hair in the morning, his strong arms and broad chest.

Rey allowed herself to stare at the movie and admire the broken, magnetic character on the screen in front of them but, she found she longed for her boyfriend in a way that made her face fall no matter how she tried to smile when her friends leaned around one another to send her a thumbs up or a grin and a wink from down the aisle throughout the film.

She thought about the plane ticket burning up in the FedEx envelope in the bedside table drawer beside her bed and considered using it immediately upon leaving the theater.

She heard Mariah Carey’s words roll through her head again, *all I want for Christmas is you*, and reflected how true the overplayed, cheesy tune was.

When the credits finished rolling, she stood and stretched, her heart feeling tired from all the mental gymnastics required to manage her feelings for Ben and her experience watching him on the silver screen and she burst into tears when Poe excitedly said, “So! That was awesome, huh?”

It was as surprising to her as it was to him that she cried but, a dam broke and suddenly she couldn’t hold the torrent back.

“Oh, Reyrey!” Rose cried, putting her arm around her.
“Peanut!!” Finn said apologetically, coming up beside them.

“What did I say?” Poe asked Paige and Gun, clueless what he must have missed.

“I’m sorry.” Rey sniffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve and patting her eyes dry, Rose tightly gripping her around the shoulders, “I just have feelings, I guess,” she said, laughing at herself quietly.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay,” Rose assured her, hugging tightly, “it’s okay.”

“C’mon,” Poe said, planting a broad hand around the back of Rey’s neck and leading her down the movie theater aisle towards the exit, their friends flanking and following, heading for a late dinner of pizza and molten lava cake, “let’s go eat some feelings.”

That’s how Rey walked out of the theater, encompassed and comforted by people she knew would allow her the space to cry in public at the end of a violent action flick.

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“Well, I loved it,” Paige said, crossing her legs in the booth at Chattanooga Brewery, taking a bite of pepperoni pizza. “I thought it was the best one yet,” she declares of the movie they had just watched together.

“It was great,” Gun nodded, taking a sip of his beer, one arm around Rosie, “never saw a movie with a buddy of mine on screen before. That was surreal.”

“Yeah, Rey, was that crazy for you?” Paige asked.

Rey nodded and raised an eyebrow, “yeah, it was. I don’t know what I was expecting but, it certainly wasn’t tears,” she says, adding “sorry guys,” feeling a bit embarrassed.

This was supposed to be a fun night, a good time to exchange White Elephant Christmas gifts, see a movie, have some laughs and let loose before they all went separate ways for the Christmas holiday and she had made it heavy and weepy with her emotional outburst, and now her shame
over it was dwindling her enjoyment of the evening to nil.

“Hey,” Finn says, sending her a smile, “don’t worry about it,” everyone nodding in assent around the table, “none of us know what that’s like for you seeing him up there.”

“Yeah, none of us are sleeping with him,” Paige says with a naughty wink, crunching a tortilla chip afterward.

Rey smiles and twists her mouth sideways, “thanks, guys,” telling them with a sigh, “I just miss him.”

“Course you do,” Rose says, patting her hand maternally, “course you do.”

“We all know what it’s like to miss people, especially at the holidays,” Poe says, “my ma has been begging me to get this big guy down to Texas for months now, ever since I popped the question, so I’m gonna fly us down to South Padre for Christmas on Tuesday,” he hugs Finn into his side and smiles at him.

“Yeah, Rey, I was gonna mention, you don’t care, do you?” Finn asks, eyes on her face, “If I go to Texas for Christmas with Poe? You can hold it down here at the store, right?”

*There goes Aspen*, Rey thinks but, she only brightly replies, “of course!”

*It’s the season of giving, after all*, she thinks, trying to make herself feel better. *Just give him this. It’ll be fine.*

“I’m doing the same thing with this one,” Rose says, shoulder-checking Gun beside her, reaching for his beer, “gotta take this guy home to meet Mama and Baba.”

Gun glows down at her and snuggles her closer, winking at her as she drinks his beer.

“And I have to go with them and make out with the cat again this year,” Paige says with an exasperated sigh, taking a swig of her own drink before adding, “although honestly, I am too wiped from work to be doing anything more than crash once we get to our parents in Indianapolis.”

“When are you all leaving?” Rey asks, the familiar dread of loneliness rising like a dangerous tide
in her throat.

“Tuesday for us,” Finn says.

“Us too,” Rose says.

“Okay well, let’s hand out presents then!” Rey announces, pulling a small package out of her bag and laying it on the table before her.

She can’t stand the thought of being abandoned by all her people, especially on Christmas, doomed to spend at least 24 hours without access to much of the outside world and anyone to talk with but, she schools her face to look chipper anyway, insistent she not damper their night or their plans.

It’s only when she’s heading into her apartment, dropped off by Gun and Rose that she hears Rose say, “as soon as I’m home, girls’ night in, yes?” that she feels the tears well up again and she nods and rushes to close the door behind herself so they are sure not to see.

******

Christmas on the North Shore isn’t even all that cold when it arrives, finding Rey alone and holed up at her apartment with a stack of movies, a Stouffer’s lasagne and an entire Mrs. Smith chocolate silk pie all to herself, leaving Rey annoyed that it’s 45 degrees when the least Mother Nature could have done was make the season bright by sending some flurries.

It’s not really cold enough to warrant layers but, it’s too cold to turn off the heat and save money so, Rey just throws that on the pile of irritants that have made up this less than amazing holiday.

It’s really not the worst thing in the world to have sole possession of the TV remote, comfort foods and a whole, entire day to spend in your pajamas and slippers, blinds closed without anyone around to accuse you of being a depressed hermit, so Rey tries her hardest to sink into *Casablanca, Gone with the Wind* and *It Happened One Night*, deciding to make a theme of it watching strong women onscreen.

By 2:30 pm, Rey’s eaten half the pie and she feels like a human bag of pudding.

Laying down to take a long nap, she hopes it will make the day slide by more quickly, anxious for
sunset which will beckon tomorrow more quickly.

She wakes an hour later to see her phone illuminating with a FaceTime call from Ben.

“Hey,” she hums lazily, holding the phone at eye level as she answers it, still laying on her side, her eyes adjusting from her nap.

“Hey, beautiful,” Ben says, the room around him considerably brighter than Rey’s cold, dark cave of a bedroom, “Merry Christmas, baby.”

“Merry Christmas,” she says, stretching and grinning.

This is already the best part of her day, her holiday, likely her entire week.

“What have you been up to today, baby doll?” Ben asks.

Rey flinches, knowing in her self-consciousness she has no impressive answer, nowhere she’s been asked to spend Christmas besides his offer of his mom’s place in Aspen, no one to spend time with locally, no exciting details to share with him and so, she punts.

“Nothing much, kicking back, resting up before work tomorrow,” she tells him, excusing herself from being dressed properly with what she hopes is an excuse, taking note of his crisp collared shirt, his perfectly-scuffed chin, his bright eyes and smoothed long, dark waves.

“What have you been up to, handsome?” she asks, hoping to evade more questioning.

She feels like a slob, like a lonely, miserable slob and she just wants to hide but, she’s just one little planet and he’s her sun and moon and stars and she’s helplessly exposed, powerless to hide any bit of herself from him.

“Pain in the ass dinner with my mom and her friends,” Ben says with an eye roll, “I swear to God, it doesn’t matter how old you get, or who you are, having dinner with your parents and their friends sucks.”

Rey drops her eyes slightly. The last thing she wants is to feel even more othered by realizing she has no mother to invite her to a boring Christmas dinner with her boring, old lady friends and she doesn’t want to draw attention to the fact she’s a misfit any more than she is by being on Ben’s phone in an oversized sweatshirt and a sloppy bun on her head in the middle of the afternoon, alone
in her dark bedroom on a major bank holiday.

“I wish I was there in bed with you instead,” he sighs, propping an arm behind his head against the wall, “or you were here with me.”

He’d been so understanding about Poe and Finn’s need for a getaway, even though their plans indirectly affected his own.

Rey smiles shyly at him. “Me too,” she says, “what do you have to do now?” she asks, aware she doesn’t know how holidays at a parent’s house work.

“Nothing,” he says in relief, “I’m done. I’m putting my feet up and talking to my girl now.”

“Where are you?” she says, feeling more awake. “Right now. What room are you in?”

“Guest room,” Ben says, his chin to his chest, reclining.

“Are you on a bed?” Rey asks, boldness growing.

“Yeah,” he says, a glint in his eye, curiosity warming his voice.

Rey bites her bottom lip and decides to hell with it.

She sits up on one elbow and slips her sweatshirt off her shoulder.

Ben sits up a little and raises an eyebrow.

It’s all the encouragement she needs.

Rey sits criss-cross on the bed and pulls her sweatshirt over her head, her bun drooping heavily off to one side of her head, hair wisping around her like an aura.

She’s invested in a new stock of sheer lacy, bras now that she has a boyfriend she knows will see her in such trappings and she’s grateful she was too lazy to find anything more practical when she sees Ben take in a sharp inhale and murmur, “fuck, baby doll” before jumping off the bed telling her, “I am locking this fucking door.”
Rey smirks, drinks in the courage his response offers her and waits for his return.

He’s looking at her interestedly when he props himself back on the bed, back straight against the headboard.

“Gonna join me?” she asks, raising eyebrows, motioning to his shirt.

He complies as quickly as humanly possible, unbuttoning and tossing his shirt aside haphazardly, compliant as a schoolboy, and resumes watching.

Rey slips her pajama pants off and throws them on the ground, sitting with her knees beneath her in the center of her bed patiently as she completes her task.

Ben follows suit, silent, watching her intently.

She reaches behind her, eyes trained on his face in her phone and catches her bra in the back, unfastens and lets it slide off, baring herself as her straps fall and the fabric slides off her body onto the bed at her knees.

“Fuck, *fuck*, baby, you are so beautiful,” he groans.

She doesn’t need to see below his waist to know where his hand has migrated, she can tell in his movement he’s aching with need and watching her.

Every response from him makes her tap into a well of energy and inspiration, something she’s never known with any other man so she boldly reaches up and twists her own nipple in her hand, moaning softly and letting her head loll backward.

When she looks at the phone again, Ben’s gaze is a fiery blaze of smoldering black coals, his lips parted and his rhythm unmistakable.

She reaches up and feels her body arch towards him imperceptibly as she pulls the rubber band from her hair in one movement, her hair tumbling over her shoulders.

He moans again, a whisper, “*holy fuck.*”

Rey takes her time, imagining Ben’s hands on her skin, runs a hand over her neck, her throat, down her breasts and into her panties, pulling them off, still seated on her knees and lets her own pleasure
direct her actions.

“This is what I do when I touch myself and think about you, Ben,” she tells him bravely, whispering, her eyes sliding closed as she feels herself light up in a flaming inferno of desire.

“Oh my God, Rey. *Fuck*, baby, let me see, show me,” he begs, his breathing hitching, his shoulder twitching with effort as his hand moves against himself off camera.

She complies and slides the phone lower, giving him access to her hand and its movement against her, sliding and pressing and imitating his fingers. She revels in the groans she elicits from his throat, and leaves her eyes closed as long as she can bear it, wanting to watch his face while this is happening to her.

“Ben,” she tells him, looking into his endless dark eyes, letting all her love and passion pour into his across the miles between them, meaning every word, emptying the tank of her courage, “I’m gonna come now, and it’s all for you. It’s for you, Ben, you. Watch. This is what you do to me,” a gasp cutting her off as she throws her head back in the throes of a crest on the final word, her body ripped open with the knowledge it’s his eyes on her, his breath in her ears, his desire for her making her bold.

When she lowers her head, her eyes focusing again, her airy sighs traded for steadier breathing, she sees his face contorted with pleasure too, head tipped back, eyes closed, arm slowing, chest heaving, his breathing crazily out of control and his face flushed.

“I love you,” she whispers, her full voice still absent.

Ben drops his chin to gaze at her, chest quieting and eyes shining with love and he says, “I love you so goddamn much, Rey. I miss you, baby doll. It’s fucking too much, I miss you too much.”

“Me too,” she says, laying down on her side again, stretching her knees out and pulling a blanket up over her chest.

“I’m so lonely for you, Ben,” a confession, tears tickling the corners of her eyes as she speaks, her deepest craving for him still unmet even if the frenzied climax has descended.

“Don’t cry, beautiful,” he says softly. “*God*, I cannot take it, Rey. Please don’t cry, baby, you’re killing me,” he insists, a break in his voice.
Rey sniffs.

She gives herself only a minute to cry, wanting to spare him the pain and herself the expense of his time, then wipes her tears with her blankets and smiles through her wet lashes.

“I’m just so thankful you’re here like this, Ben,” she says, “I’m so thankful I can see you a little today.”

“Me too, baby,” he says. “me too. It’s better than nothing, and I’m thankful, too, but, this is a mistake, being apart today. I don’t know how this happened - me in Colorado and you in Tennessee but this is wrong - it’s just wrong. We are supposed to be together. This is not okay.”

She’s gazing into his eyes across the miles, and he is somber and deliberate.

“This is the last Christmas we are spending like this, Rey,” Ben says. “Apart like this.”

It is the sweetest moment of Rey’s day, the most magic her season offers, the first smile and the last gift she needs, the only voice she hears all Christmas Day long and it is Ben’s.

*******

Rey decided on a dance theme on the days following Christmas maybe as a way to lift her spirits, maybe as a way to pretend life was gay and cheery, maybe a way to celebrate the stupid “happiest time of the year” was fucking over, thank God but, for whatever reason she submerged herself and whatever visitors made their way to Resistance Video the week between Christmas and New Year’s in Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers and Gene Kelly.

*Top Hat, Swing Time, An American in Paris, Ziegfeld Follies,* Rey listened to the big band orchestrations as she balanced the books, dusted the shelves, perused Instagram, heated leftover lasagne, and texted Ben from work. A steady stream of customers the week she worked without Finn helped, and she was grateful she’d stayed and kept the shop open after all.

As lovely as the revenue is for Resistance however, Rey missed her people madly and considering she had a hemorrhaging tank of loneliness, she came up with a plan and sought her friends’ company the best way she knew how: with the offer of food.
To: Finn, Poe, Rose, Paige, Gun

From: Rey

11:24 am

Hey all! When is everybody ready to party? Wanna New year’s Eve together? I’m thinking pot luck? I can provide ice? My place?

- Rey

From Finn: Yes 2 NYE. Yes 2 potluck. No 2 your house, Peanut.

From Poe: same as my fiancé. Our house is an option, too.

From Rose: hi! I miss you all!!! This sounds perfect! Great idea, R! I’ll make any dishes needed. Our house works, too!

From Paige: DUH. YES. IN. Rosie, can you make those cheeseballs? And cake pops? Tell me where to go, someone, anyone.

From Gun: Sounds great! Babe, can you make that dip I like, too, plz?

From Finn: RosiePosie, pretty please can you make the chocolate peanut butter frosted brownies you made for Halloween last year?

From Poe: let’s do Rose and Pager’s since apparently Ro is making all the food and Reyrey, your place is tiny. No offense. Can you add chicken wings please, Ro?

From Paige: Oh! Also, that one salad you made that one time! With the goat cheese!

From Gun: Shit, I have to work till 11 but, I’ll be there by the time the ball drops.
From Finn: WE DON’T WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU CALL IT IN THE BEDROOM, SHERIFF.

From Poe: I’ll bring booze. What do we want? The normal shit?

From Paige: OH! Ro, can you also make that dope ass hot chocolate with the peppermint you made at Mama’s?

From Rose: OMG, nerds, let me write this down! GAH! Yes, I will be the kitchen help. POE, I REQUIRE RUM. LOTS OF IT.

From Finn: I’m already creating a playlist for Dance Party U.S.A. News Flash: Miley Cyrus may or may not feature heavily.

From Poe: Got it, Ro. Thanks, sugar. Also, can you make those sausage balls? With the cream cheese like you make? And potato skins with the chives? Please?

From Paige: Alright but srsly, who’s kissing me at midnight?

From Gun: Poe, I’ll get some home-brewed hops from a buddy of mine, too. You’ll like it. Will also provide non-booze for the evening.

From Rey: uhhhhhhhhhh, have I told you people I MISSED YOU????? Rosie, I believe you know how I feel about your confetti cake batter cupcakes. I’ll still bring ice.

It is altogether so much easier for Rey to sing along to Gershwin floating from the TV after that exchange.

******

Rey bounces as she walks through a nearly-empty North Shore on New Year’s Eve after leaving a sign on the door Closed for NYE around 9 pm and she smiles to herself, appreciating the perfectly cool, harmless breeze, the ending of a particularly difficult holiday season, and the fact she gets to hang out with her friends tonight.
It has straight up sucked this year, but she’s survived.

It’s been an extremely busy day, maybe the busiest all season with everyone rushing to scoop up a film to fill the hours awaiting midnight with something wonderful on their screens, and she’s barely had time to catch her breath.

But, Rey’s a survivor.

She’s made it.

If she can do this, she could possibly do anything, even a keep a New Year’s resolution.

Maybe tomorrow she’ll think of one.

She’ll ask Ben.

He’s been so stoked to get to work on the new indy project next week, he’s full of ideas and inspiration lately.

She hops her way to Rose and Paige’s house while mentally humming along to *both* Destiny’s Child *Survivor* and Gloria Gaynor’s *I Will Survive*, one right after the other, smiling secretly that she made it, she made it, and this is her reward, this night catching up and kicking back with her friends.

She’s content to spend the evening with them and still have time to ring in the New Year with Ben before it turns midnight in California.

To: Ben

From: Rey

9:04 pm

Happy New Year’s Eve

ugh, Ben, I miss you like crazy!

I’m setting an alarm to wake so I can talk to you

at your midnight

I love you more than anything! xoxoxo

She pockets her phone and knocks a silly tune on Rose and Paige’s door while unzipping her fleecy jacket, ready to eat herself silly, dance the night away and laugh her ass off.
Paige swings the door open wide and bellows, “Reyrey! Happy New Year!” as she pulls Rey in for a hug, helping her over the threshold and tugging her jacket away, a cornucopia of delicious scents assailing Rey as soon as the door opens.

“Oh, Pager, I missed you!” Rey muffles into Paige’s shoulder, immediately warming head to toe.

“Go in the kitchen, Rosie has your favorite all ready,” Paige says as she releases her and shoves her gently towards the room.

Rey hugs Finn as she continues through the house towards the kitchen, stopping to survey the table, piled platters of finger foods and drinks enticing Rey in a way no pre-packaged food she’s eaten the last two weeks could have and she pushes through the swinging door to Rose’s kitchen, ready to help serve and sample.

Rose is standing hunched over at the oven, mitts handling hot baking sheets of something wafting tantalizingly, and Ben Solo is sitting on the counter next to her, legs hanging against the cabinetry.

Rey freezes, her mouth drops open and Ben jumps off the counter and swoops her into his arms with a laugh, swinging her around by the middle and kissing her thunderstruck.

“Hey, beautiful!” he says, kissing her again, grinning like he knows a secret, like he’s won a prize, “Happy New Year’s, baby doll,” he tells her.

Rey makes several indistinguishable, barely human noises of shock and surprise as it registers he’s here, Ben’s here, he’s here and as soon as she can send another message to her body she makes sure to send a command to kiss him back.

She pulls her legs around him and wraps around him like a koala on a tree, clinging to him, astounded at the universe for sending her such a gift tonight.

“Ben!” she squeals, hugging him tightly with every limb, speaking between his assault of kisses on her lips, “what the hell? How did you…when…where???”

“I worked it out with Gun,” he tells her between kisses, “no way was I missing another holiday with my girl,” finally there’s a pause in explanations and Rey gets the kind of kiss she can savor, the one she can taste in her mouth and feel in the core of her body pressed tightly against her boyfriend, standing in her best friend’s kitchen or not.
She’s still seated in his arms, twisted around him like a climbing vine, his laced hands under her rear, a look of pure pride on his face, undoubtedly pleased to have stunned Rey to this degree with his arrival, kissing him like there’s no tomorrow, like she’s half-dead and he’s brought her back to life, like she’s survived a battle and this is her victory when Finn walks up behind Ben to chat with Rey over Ben’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Finn tells her, “but, I picked him up in my car from the airport. Last thing we need is a leaked photo of Ben Solo in a sheriff’s deputy cruiser,” he says, howling with laughter maybe louder than he should.

Rey hops down from Ben’s arms but stays wrapped around her boyfriend, leaning her chin on his chest, staring up at his face lovingly, putting pieces of his surprise arrival together.

How he determined on Christmas he was not missing New Year’s with her.

How he texted Gun and came up with an arrival plan.

How Rey’s party suggestion provided the ideal cover for surprising her, actually.

How Finn came and retrieved him from the airport, how he was planted here at Rose’s, how he helped set up for the party and licked the beaters of cake batter for the cupcakes Rose made an hour ago.

Rey just smiled up at him, arms wound around his middle, settled on his hips, hands laced at the small of his back, face glowing in adoration at him and felt him brush the hair off her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she whispered as he kissed her again.

“Oh, Lord,” Paige said, entering the kitchen, seeing Rey and Ben while Rose busied herself around them, totally ignoring their make out session in the center of her kitchen where Ben and Rey had taken to kissing one another till they were breathless while Rose pulled things from the oven and opened the fridge and balanced trays.

“I swear to God,” Paige continued, picking up a cookie and taking a bite as she hopped up to sit on the kitchen counter Ben had vacated, “if I don’t find a man soon, somebody just take me out back and put me out of my misery.”

“Oh!” Rey squawked, eyes shooting wide, suddenly remembering, “I forgot the ice!”

Poe walked in behind Finn and plopped two 10-lb bags of iced on Rose’s counter and says easily, “sounds about right,” as he kissed his own boyfriend hello and Rey breathed a sigh of relief and bliss, so full of glee at being known and loved and supremely happy she could have imploded with
When midnight strikes in Times Square, Rey is oblivious, apart from the dull roar she hears in the living room beyond them, their friends’ celebrating and shouting congratulations to the last year and welcome to the next one, their raucous cheering heard over the familiar tune of Auld Lang Syne coming from the TV.

She has been pressed flat against the hallway wall for an indeterminate amount of time by then, her boyfriend having cornered her when she was returning from the bathroom earlier, having loomed over her, caging her against the wall and kissed her, his beautiful mouth devouring, demanding, needy, all man and unashamed, running his hands under her shirt, into her bra mercilessly, driving her crazy for so long she thought she might evaporate or melt or just fucking fuse herself to this man.

“Happy New Year’s, Ben,” she whispers up at his lips, kissing him just as well as she damn well pleases, reaching into his mouth bravely, desperate for more.

“Happy New Year’s, beautiful,” he whispers back, too close to see one another’s eyes, words whispered into one another’s parted lips.

“Take me to bed or lose me forever,” Rey tells him, throwing a famous line at him from Top Gun, her head carelessly tossed, playfully delivered, against his lips as he pulls her clothes off in her bedroom once they’re home, together, alone.

“It’s just us, now,” Ben tells her, a Kylo Ren line, mischievously spoken, deep and bossy, dangerous and commanding, laced with sex.

This is more than surviving, she thinks, this is much better than just surviving. This is living.

She completely misses the first hour and a half of the next year, adrift and wasted and exultant, Ben’s body in her bed, on her skin, inside of her, his soul meshed with hers, a consolation for the endless ache of loneliness the last week.

She feels the crumbling fortress she’s lived inside these days alone dissipate, the falsely high fort of flimsy, marshmallow bricks evaporate, everything she thought she needed to make it through the memories of abandonment, the dire whispers of isolation, the heartbreak of unworthiness threatening to drown her the last few days without her friends and her man to help her stay buoyed and she surrenders completely to Ben, his body and spirit a better barrier around her against lies, his hands on her building something substantial, concrete, impenetrable to protect her, stronger than any simple adage, any generic lyric, any movie script, anything on earth.

“I couldn’t stay away,” Ben growls into her ear, his hips pinning hers, her body deliciously trapped and tangled beneath him, every pitch and surge moving them in sync, over and over in the pitch
black dead of night in Rey’s bed together, the newly born year silent beyond their room.

“Never,” she breathes, kissing him brazenly, lifting, radiating, reaching for him in return, “never, never stay away from me. Never. Give me what I need, Ben, give me what I want. Please, Ben… please, take me apart,” begging him for what only he can give, what she only ever wants from him.

His touch rebirths her body, one inch at a time, her collarbone where his kiss is a promise, her breast where his pinch is a miracle, her navel where his brush is a thrill, her hip where his grip is a demand, her wet center where his touch is a symphony. One fraction at a time she is rebuilt, reborn, rejuvenated and Rey squirms happily beneath him as he worships her.

She follows the worn path in her soul to her root of pain, the one that lives in a dungeon called abandonment and she applies the treatment of her man’s love for her like a salve and feels something ancient and ugly wither beautifully, replaced with a blossom, a bloom of truth.

*He loves her, he came for her.*

She didn’t need rescuing but she had needed reminding and as he licks his sweetness into her mouth, leaves his seed, warm and deep inside her core, she trades him the pain of aloneness for the ecstasy of reunion, the hopelessness of her past for the joy of belonging.

“You’re mine, baby, mine,” his words a holy promise, a filthy melody as he satisfies them both with release, matching, harmonious, exquisitely pulsating inside her, deafening.

When Rey wakes, January sunshine sparkling through her bedroom window, in her boyfriend’s arms, wearing his shirt and feeling his breath against her neck under her bun, she greets it warmly, like a homecoming, like a sweet friend, like a familiar family member, like she belongs.

******
Reunion

Chapter Summary

BONUS CHAPTER!!!!

moodboard as always by the fantastic rileybabe
beta’d as always by the wonderful uselessenglishmajor

NORTH SHORE Chapter 12 Monday, May 7
TRUE NORTH Chapter 6 Tuesday, May 8

*see below for author's notes

xo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“The only thing sweeter than union

is reunion.”

- Kathleen McGowan

Even with her eyes still unopened, she felt Ben’s fingers gently teasing through her hair.
A slow smile stretched across Rey’s face, her eyes closed as she crawled on top of his frame and sprawled across his chest, feeling her way there happily. She listened to his heart thump under her ear, inhaled his manliness all around her, leaving her linens and body claimed with himself and she grinned as the January late morning light filtering through her eyelids while he kissed the crown of her head.

“Happy new year,” she murmured, and kissed his chest below her lips.

“Happiest new year possible,” he said, his body vibrating beneath her, waking her limbs and torso with the reverberating.

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” she repeated, her primary sentiment the last 12 hours, something she couldn’t seem to make herself stop saying.

“Believe it, beautiful,” Ben said, “I needed an actual happy holiday, not a rerun of Christmas, missing my Rey.”

“How did I get so lucky?” Rey asked, propping a chin on his chest and looking into Ben’s eyes.

Even in the morning, even with the indented lines of blanket stitching crossing his face, a faint rosiness to his cheeks, the swell of sleep on his lips, his hair a thousand directions, he was the most enslaving thing Rey had ever seen.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, pulling her by the hips so she was within kissing distance to himself, “I’m the lucky one,” he said, kissing her lips softly.


“Fuck that,” her boyfriend said, simultaneously pulling her higher, flipping her back to the mattress beneath him and kissing her deeply, all laughter and tongues and intentional invasiveness.

“Ben, Ben, Ben!” she squealed loudly, squirming as he pinned her wrists to the bed beside her head, nuzzling her breasts and neck with his nose, ticking her mercilessly with his long hair while she gasped for breath amidst her gales of giggles.
“What?” he asked, feigning innocence, slowly, torturously dragging his hardness across her belly, the most unsympathetic offer of apology ever.

Rey was helpless.

Her cries of laughter, her admirable attempts at wrestling and fending him off quickly merged with a desire to make use of the time she’d been given and she roughly shoved him off, shocking him as she sat straight up in bed, yanked her shirt off briskly, *his shirt, the one she’d freed him of last night, the one she’d crawled into before sleep*, and laid back down again, pulling him by the shoulders atop her again before he could react.

“So that again,” she commanded, leaning up to plunder his mouth, tugging his head roughly down to hers, scraping his scalp with her nails.

Ben smiled against her lips and grumbled a sweet “anything, baby,” as he reached down to pull her panties off, removing his own boxer briefs once he was done, Rey kicking to help as much as she could while still kissing him insistently, hurriedly, desperately.

This had been too difficult, too lonely a month to waste time now.

She wanted them joined as closely as humanly possible and she wanted that *right fucking now* before time or distance or people or fate or anything else could come between them.

“Hey, hey,” he said after a moment, slowing to realize Rey was frantic in her kisses, panting erratically, frenzied all of a sudden as she moved below him. “Baby, slow down,” he said, pulling back to look into her eyes, pushing her hair off her face, causing her chest to calm and her arms relax against his back.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking into Rey’s eyes, seeing erupting sadness there, instead of the pure fervor of desire he hoped to see.

“Nothing,” Rey lied, hoping she could just get his body to cooperate, avoid words, just *feel, feel, feel*, stop talking, stop thinking so much.

“I can feel something going on,” he said gently, brushing hair behind her ears, studying her eyes, his elbow holding himself up around Rey beneath him, his body still above her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Ben, nothing,” she repeated, leaning up to kiss him again, hoping to avoid the tangle of
confusion and toxicity in her head. “Nothing.”

“Baby,” he calmly said, serious, not removing his body but, holding still above her, “I love you. I know you. What’s the matter? Tell me.”

_The only way out is through_, she heard her head prompt her, Ben’s eyes watching her.

_The truth shall set you free_, she remembered.

“I…I don’t know,” she said, feeling her way towards the source of her anxiety. “I just…I think I’m a little scared or something. Just…maybe, I’m scared you’ll disappear. I…I had a shitty month, ya know, I was alone a lot and…and I miss you…all the time, I miss you and I hate it and then Christmas was almost unbearable and… God, Ben, I missed you so much and I’m a little terrified.”

Ben scooped her close and kissed her cheeks, her lips, her chin, his arms reaching underneath her, pulling closer to cradle her beneath him.

“Do you know how much I missed you?” he asked.

Rey nodded.

“You know I love you?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You know I’m here now? You know I’d go anywhere to find you? Rey, do you know I’d rather be with you, right here in this bed than anywhere else on earth?” he asked.

She nodded slowly, unconvincingly, clearly fighting to believe his words.

“Rey,” Ben said, looking at her, four and a half inches between them, “you have me. You have all of me,” he said, squeezing her tightly to emphasize his words.

Rey felt her eyes trace between his, studying them intently as if there were messages buried inside, secret hieroglyphics meant to sift the truth of his words for her, could she only find and decipher them.

“You don’t believe me?” he murmured, brow furrowing slightly.
“I do, I do, I…I’m trying to,” Rey said, struggling to convey what she thought. “Ben, I…” a huge exhaled huff, “I am not used to being loved. I am not used to someone wanting to be with me. I am not used to having someone I love so desperately, someone who is the center of my universe and it makes me feel like I am falling off a cliff and I’m afraid I won’t be caught,” she confessed.

“I am afraid I will fall too deeply and I will be left. Alone,” she finished, no longer able to look into his eyes.

Luckily, he didn’t force her to.

Luckily, he gave her space.

Luckily, he waited.

Luckily, she gave voice to her feelings and he let her.

“I get it,” he said, finally. “I do. I hear you, baby, I get it,” he replied. “But, I want you to know this: I have never been in love before. Not like this. Not ever, Rey. Tell me what you need, anything you need, I want to give it to you. Whatever it is.”

Rey looked up into his eyes.

Those bottomless, heartfelt, chocolate eyes and she warmed head to toe in their diffusing light, her tightly-stacked fortress walls built around herself, the self-protecting, panicky worries, snapping like dry twigs, her clouds parting, her fears twinkling away as the sky around them faded.

She looked up into his face and breathed in courage.

“I love you more than anything,” she whispered. “And you could destroy me,” she confided, a whisper, a desperate, sinful, hushed confession.

“I love you so much, Ben. You could destroy everything,” she breathed, solemn, trusting, hopeful, her words chosen carefully, painfully exposed, raw, bleeding, her oldest wound, the primal loss of abandonment howling through the echoing hallways of her heart, mournful, warning, calling her to stop, don’t, save yourself; the ghosts in dungeons underneath her heart rattling their cages, hungry for the opportunity to recapture her.

“What I want is to build a life with you,” he said, a word, a pledge, a vow, “around you,” he kissed her. “I want to love you and deserve you and please you and protect you. I want to take care of you like you take care of me. Will you let me try?”

He pulled her close, so close there were no secret doors, no locked closets, no forbidden halls or
forgotten rooms he missed as he told her he loved her again and again, interspersed with kisses increasing in frequency, in heat, in ferocity “let me in, let me in,” his decadent, dominant request, urgent in her ear until he entered her firmly, surely, insistently, pushing his truth, his body, his love into her core, I love you, I love you, I love you his mantra, his beat, his oath to her, further and further, chasing her fears down every passageway, opening cell doors, slaying her demons, cleansing anything in his path, a tide of love, a wave of hope in his wake.

Rey lay staring into Ben’s eyes after, side by side on pillows, naked and tangled, bare and exposed in every way a woman could be, available in a way she had never known before and she searched her soul for shame. She peeked around corners in her mind, down long corridors and beckoned leftover demons, any hidden whispers of cynicism, of disbelief to show their face in the January sunshine.

This was a moment to face them.

She shouted down into the depths, challenging and listened for her voice to echo back as she stared into his endless eyes, waiting to hear the taunts of her past, the fears to fly up from the catacombs and grin triumphantly but, she heard only the rush of her own heartbeat.

She saw only her man’s eyes.

She felt only the bed they lay in together, softly rumpled and nested around them.

Rey smiled and felt her hair drag across the pillow behind her head as she pulled herself closer to Ben’s face and kissed him soundly.

“I belong to you,” she swore it, understanding.

“Damn right,” he told her, smiling and sure, squeezing her bottom under his hands as he pulled her close again.

“Let’s never leave this bed,” Rey suggested, pushing his hair back.

“We’ve been in it all year so far, I don’t see a reason to change that now,” he agreed.

“Think there’s any food open today?” Rey asked, eyes shifting to each side, back and forth while she thought.
“You just said, ‘let’s not leave’,” Ben reminded her with a grin emerging.

“I meant, let’s not leave except for food,” she teased him back.

Ben snorted at her and shook his head. “Fine but, you’re not going anywhere without me,” he said, moving to stand. “Even the shower.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked, rising on her side of the bed, “I’m going to make you hold my hand, even around this house.”

Ben chased her into the bathroom, into the shower, into clothes and into the North Shore, the new year a bright promise shining down onto them, the freezing crystal sun cheerfully bright above.

As they marched into the grocery story together, tied too tightly to be bothered to move as separate people and when he carried her on his back all the way home again, bags of ice cream and quesadilla ingredients hanging from her hands, bouncing against his strong chest, Rey glared in the perfection of being half one whole, part of a complete set, the sweetly gratifying, muted boom of a final piece sliding into place, the world around her good and the man who carried her in possession of her heart.

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“So,” Ben says, popping a piece of cheese into his mouth between words, standing behind Rey, arms around her waist, chin resting on her shoulder while she flips a quesadilla in the pan at the stop top in front of her, “why didn’t you tell me you know how to cook?”

“Don’t be impressed,” she said, “it’s this or mac and cheese,” she says, trying to beat his hands in a race to the ingredients spread out on the counter as he scoops up more food before she’s finished cooking.

“Mmmm, my favorite,” he says, still grabbing food quicker than she can use it up in their meal.

A sassier version of Rey, in another parallel universe, would bat him away, swat him with her spatula, scold him, hip check him further away, tease him, be seductive, or laugh but this is Rey Lowood and Ben Solo, her boyfriend, the love of her life, here in her tiny, rented kitchen on the North Shore and she loves him and she has him - all of him, he said so - and so, she turns over her
shoulder and kisses his pretty mouth and smiles back at the stove to finish making lunch while he chomps nibbles of stolen food beside her ear approvingly, his arms tight around her.

“What’s this?” she gasps, Ben lifting her hand from the stovetop and sliding a heavy silver bangle onto her wrist, lifting it up towards his mouth so he can kiss her at her tattoo, the one he first saw, the part of her he first touched, the one that made him first think she was lucky, that way she feels with his love in her heart and his arms around her waist.

“Silver and gold,” he says, as Rey turns to face him, her eyes flying between his face, his cocky, sweet smirk and her wrist, the weighty, slim bangle hanging perfectly, buffed and shining like a flawless band of beauty on her arm, inscribed in a cursive font, true north, “or in this case, platinum, baby, just to show everyone we belong to each other and we are most definitely not friends anymore,” he tells her, reminding her of their first night together, their first joint decision to be friends.

“Ben,” she whispers, “it’s gorgeous,” stunned, studying it there on her arm, her other hand thrown around his neck, Ben leaning down to kiss her throat while she gazes at the bracelet she’s wearing.

“You are, Rey,” he tells her, “you’re my center of gravity. You’re my north star. My home base,” he tells her, twisting her hips in his hands as he speaks, telling her in every way what she is to him, unwilling to be ambiguous.

Rey looks up at him and kisses him, speechless, shaking her head.

“Merry Christmas,” he murmurs into her mouth.

“But…but…but, you already bought me a plane ticket!” she exclaimed. “You didn’t have to do this!” unsure how to accept such a pricey gift, many times over more expensive than anything she’s ever owned before.

“Yeah, a plane ticket you haven’t used yet,” he says, “and besides, that’s not a Christmas gift, that’s more like a necessity. For me.”

“Ben, I…” Rey starts but, she is just plain overwhelmed.

“You have me, Rey,” Ben says into her eyes, holding her face in his huge hands, thumbing her
cheeks, “you have *all* of me.”

“Do you like it?” he asks, looking actually a touch nervous.

“Oh my God, Ben, I’m speechless! It’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen!” she said, both arms up around his neck.

“It is *not* the prettiest thing I have ever seen,” Ben says, his arms around her, “but, that’s who it belongs to now,” he says, looking pleased with himself in a way that makes Rey’s heart swell, proud he’s given her something to carry around on her person to show everyone she’s his.

*A happy surprise,* Rey thinks, remembering Rose’s words to her months ago, insisting to herself she not remove it, feel unworthy of it, refuse it.

“Thank you,” Rey says smiling up at her man, “thank you for not being my friend anymore,” she tells him over and over as she kisses him till he’s laughing.

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“Want to watch a movie?” Rey asks, her feet piled in Ben’s lap as they nosh lunch on the couch in her apartment together.

“Whatever you want, baby doll,” he shrugs.

This is new territory for them together, filling time with diversions and entertainment while they are together. It seems crazy since they are in a legitimate relationship but, the nature of long-distance courtship hasn’t provided opportunity till now so, these are new waters to paddle through.

“Oh! I have an idea,” Rey says, her eyes lighting up. “Here,” she says, tossing Ben a jacket as she jumps off the couch.

“Uh, I’m going to have to object if the movie watching requires additional clothing,” he says, with a playfully argumentative tone as he raises his eyebrows and holds up the jacket at Rey, while still seated on the couch.
“Come on, mister,” she says emphatically, tugging his hand to help him off the couch as she shrugs on her own jacket and steps into boots. “This will be fun. Trust me,” she says, grabbing her keys.

Outside, the sun is still shining and the temperature has risen only slightly, leaving the ground a wet, sparkling playground as Ben and Rey hold hands, heading for the Resistance where Rey unlocks the door and they step inside, flipping on overhead lights.

“Okay,” she says, her back to Ben, ready to head for the movie she has in mind on a back wall, where she knows it to be but, Ben pulls her to a stop and kicks the door closed with his foot.

“Hey,” he says, looking down at Rey in a way that makes her heart skip beats and play music, “I haven’t been in here since we met,” he says, looking down at her.

“And you were way over there,” he says, brushing her hair off her shoulders, nodding with his chin to the counter, “and I was way over here,” he says.

Her memory of that day is still so crisp around the edges, Rey could paint it if she were an artist, and she nods, feeling at once wistful and relieved as she tells him, “God, you were so hot, I couldn’t breathe.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks, picking her up around the waist and walking towards the countertop behind her. “You thought so? All I remember is I couldn’t fucking take my eyes off you,” he admits, kissing her lips as he walks, her arms wound around his neck.

“Oh, I know,” she says, a knowing grin on her lips, “Finn told me you were checking me out.”

“He did?” Ben laughs out loud, “I didn’t know he saw that,” he says, sitting Rey on the counter and moving to stand between her spread knees, her thighs wide around his hips.

“Apparently, yep,” she says and then confessionally, a beat of sincerity as it hits her where she is right now - in this room where she met him and mourned him and missed him, “you took my breath clean away.”

“And you lit up my life like a star, baby,” he tells her, leaning in and closing all space between them, “like the first, beautiful star in my whole dark sky.”
Ben tilts her face towards him and settles against her, brushing her body with his, too many layers between them and as his mouth moves to open hers, his body overpowering hers in her most favorite way, she remembers again where they are and how impractical this is and when his mouth moves to her neck, sucking sweet, open kisses onto her skin, she uses the last shreds of sanity as he lifts the hem of her shirt and slips his cold hands against her skin, to whisper his name.

“Hmmm?” he asks in response, not lifting his eyes, his hand working beneath her sweater, palming and thumbing her breasts while he kisses her throat.

“The poster,” she churns out, eyes closed, enjoying.

She’s glimpsed the princess with the blaster over her shoulder, remembering her there on the wall, feeling her stare penetrating a hole in Rey’s back as Ben works his hands into her bra, the princess’s eyes silently watching, judging, looming and she sucks in a breath to keep from squirming away.

“Poster,” he repeats, grinding himself against her on the counter, his fingers pulling the lace of her bra aside under her shirt, his hands finding skin.

“Behind me…wall…” Rey chokes out, a last ditch attempt to use language, “your mom.”

Ben freezes at that word and lifts his head, hair hanging in his eyes, hands motionless.

He looks at Rey and then behind her at the poster on the wall of the princess, and back at Rey again.

“Right,” he says, “uh, can we get out of here?” he says, shamelessly maneuvering himself through his jeans, helping Rey hop off the counter and shaking his hair from his eyes.

“Got it,” she announces after a minute, having retrieved what she was here for and ready to leave again.

“Come on,” she says, taking his hand and leading him away, locking the door behind them. She feels Ben relax as they step outside again, the cool day alleviating the remaining pent-up energy used in the store.
“Okay,” he says, breathing fresh winter air as they walk between the Resistance and Rey’s apartment, “what did you pick?” he asks, reaching around Rey for the VHS case.

“Pride and Prejudice?”

“You need to understand who Mr. Darcy is,” she informs him, “and this is the best version,” she announces proudly, believing it wholly.

“Hey, it’s Uncle Larry,” Ben says, examining the box.

“What?” Rey asks, taking the box back, unsure what he means, “who?”

“Uncle Larry,” Ben repeats, “he was a friend of my mom’s,” he says, pointing to the box in Rey’s hand. She examines it again.

“Lawrence Olivier is your ‘Uncle Larry’?” she asks, incredulously.

“Mr. Vivien Leigh?” she asks, jaw dropped, knowing them to have been married at one time.

“Max de Winter!?” she nearly shouts, naming his arguably best-known role from Rebecca, one of Rey’s favorites.

“Yeah,” Ben says, not impressed and certainly not embarrassed. “But, when I was a kid he was just a sweet old guy. He died when I was like, a kindergartener. I used to sit and watch TV with him. He taught me how to dunk cookies in milk. Sweet old guy,” he says, trailing off, “always kind of sad, though.”

“Lawrence Olivier was your ‘Uncle Larry’,” Rey repeats under her breath, shaking her head as they walk to her apartment.

She wonders if he understands just how crazy that is.

She wonders how many incredibly famous people he knows on a first-name basis, whom we talks about like extended family members.

She wonders if she’ll ever get used to it.

Nearing her apartment, she pulls a single key from deep inside her jeans pocket, a freshly-minted key on a tiny loop of acia beads and swings it in front of Ben’s eyes as she stops at her front door.
“Merry Christmas,” she says with a smile and a wink up at him, pressing the key into his palm. “I had this made the day after you left last time,” she tells him proudly.

It’s Ben’s turn to drop his jaw slightly, amazed that she is giving him something important, something significant, the only thing of true value she has - she’s giving him access to herself.

“For me?” he asks, turning it over in his hand, fingering the beads attached.

“For you,” she says, wholly enjoying his face as he looks over the key to Rey’s whole world in his hand, a few of her beads from Paige’s party attached.

“I decided to let you keep some of my beads since you couldn’t part with them last time,” she teases him, “and I want you here as much as possible so, yes, the key is for you, boyfriend,” she tells him as he pulls her close and kisses her.

“You gonna unlock the door?” she says as he kisses her without stopping on the front stoop.

Happily, he unlocks the door and they are barely through it when he presses her against it, roughly pulling her clothes off, covering her exposed skin with his mouth, his hands, his body inch by inch until he lifts her with one arm between his thighs and enters her against it, strongly and without apology, telling her thank you, telling her he loves her, telling her she drives him fucking crazy, that’s the hottest gift he’s ever been given, that she is his home and his girl and his truest north, and she revels in it when he can’t contain himself and he finishes in no time flat, allowing Rey the sincerely gratifying knowledge he was nearly crazed and it’s because she gave more of herself to him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, still out of breath, his pants at his ankles and his chest heaving as Rey slides to the floor, enjoying the deep, lazier kisses, his mouth worshiping hers gratefully, “you just don’t know what you do to me, beautiful, I apologize. You make me fucking out of control.”

“No apologies, are you kidding?” she asks, as they right their clothes and stay only inches from one another, “I like knowing I have power over you,” she says wickedly.

“Um, yes, you do, you do,” he says, giving a tremendous exhale as his breathing calms, “no doubt about that. Jesus,” he says.
Rey grabs a blanket for them and she pops the video into the ancient VHS player and presses play, scooting in closely to Ben on her couch, a rosy, chunky knit afghan pulled over their laps.

She kisses him while the credits roll over the black and white banners on the TV, the orchestral arrangement preceding the action whisking them away to regency-era Britain, and she stops as she hears dialogue beginning, Lizzie Bennet and her sisters escorting them to the Longbourne estate of Hertfordshire.

20 minutes into the movie, Ben has moved lengthwise on the couch beside Rey, planting his head in her lap, feet hanging over the far end of the couch so he is splayed across the entire thing, Rey totally cornered.

She cards through his soft hair, touching his ear and neck and occasionally the firm, round swell of his muscled shoulder, her favorite part of him, she thinks, well, second favorite, she muses, and she can’t wipe the smile from her face the entire time.

She gets to snuggle her boyfriend here on her couch on New Year’s Day.

She gets to call Ben her boyfriend.

Ben, who she fell in love with on a sidewalk in July.

Ben, who she thought she’d never see again, once upon a time.

Ben, who slipped a platinum bangle on her wrist.

Ben Solo, who dated Jennifer Allison, the Oscar winner.

Ben Solo, the movie actor who learned how to dunk cookies in milk with Lawrence Olivier.

Her brain works overtime trying to appreciate, trying to sort, trying to slow itself down, and she feels a bubble of unease rising up her spine.

Another ten minutes into the movie, Lizzie Bennet is at Netherfield with Jane and Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy and Ben turns face-down in her lap where he lays on the couch and Rey feels him mouthing her crotch through her jeans.

She squeals and barely squirms, “Ben,” she hisses, back arching slightly, tickled physically and giggling slightly, “you’re not watching,” she means the movie.

“Yes, yes, good, good, I’m learning lots,” he muffles, mouth twisting and teeth skimming gently against the seam of her pants, already driving her mad, his hands sliding under her cheeks, lifting her up slightly.
Everything is getting blurry. His mouth is working her through her pants, his fingers grazing every bit of her underneath him, up and down, back and forth, fucking her through her clothes and she can’t tell if she’s getting damp from the inside out or the other way but, when he growls, “off, take these off,” darkly, she hurries to comply.

Lizzie Bennet is turning down a proposal from Mr. Collins when Rey dashed back under the afghan blanket, naked from the waist down, back onto the couch in the corner, and Ben pulls the blanket over his head as he moves to lick and suck her to climax, his cold fingertips trailing frozen heat across her nipples, her belly, two fingers into her deeply and back into his own mouth again, a circuit he repeats until she’s panting, head thrown back, hands gripping his hair, dripping wet into his mouth below her, sweater pulled up to her throat, back arched totally off the couch, screaming her man’s name.

She yanks her sweater down to her navel as she feels the wintery chill again, her descent making her head swim as she rejoins reality, Lizzie Bennet turning down Mr. Darcy’s first proposal on the screen in front of her, Ben emerging from the blanket with thoroughly messed up hair, with an utterly devilish grin, wiping his face with his enormous hand as if he’d just finished one hell of a meal.

“Fuck, baby, you taste so good,” he says, kissing her deeply, smelling like sex and triumphant man, “you’ve got the sweetest pussy on earth and it’s all mine,” he says, proudly.

“Um, yes, it is,” Rey says, still recovering, kissing him back, “and thank God because you are really, really, really good at that,” she says, profoundly.

Ben lays his head against her heaving chest, curled between her breasts, warm blanket around them, her sweater against his cheek and his arms encircling her and Rey’s breathing normalizes as she tucks her man in closely, cuddled together on her couch.

She’s so lucky, so blessed.

He’s so good to her, so generous, so intuitive.

He reads her, he pleases her.

He wants to build a life with her, he said, wants to build it around her.

He wants to protect her and take care of her, that’s what he’d said.

He wants her to let him try.
She glances up to the screen and sees Lizzie Bennet wandering Netherfield, evading Mr. Darcy.

Lizzie is poor, Darcy is loaded.

She wonders if Lizzie felt unworthy of Darcy, if that’s part of why she rejected him.

Was it too hard to accept this rich, handsome, powerful man could be in love with someone as slight as herself?

Is that what’s hard for Rey, too?

He said he wants to love her.

He wants Rey to let him in, in all the ways.

Can she?

Can she let him try?

It sounds an awful lot like depending on someone, like depending on him.

It sounds like expecting him to be something she can’t provide for herself if she needs to later.

It sounds a lot like needing someone, like needing him.

It sounds like rescue.

Rey thinks about the empty hallways in the dungeons of her heart, the lonely, vacant cells with ghosts and she hears a whisper calling her to doubt, to resist, and she stiffens under Ben’s body imperceptibly as Mr. Wickham endangers Lydia’s reputation on the screen.

“She’ll be ruined,” Lizzie’s aunt moans to her, “she’ll destroy us all,” her aunt wails, mournfully on screen, believing Lydia’s reputation to be soiled beyond repair by scandal.

It feels prophetic and Rey shifts under Ben’s body, feeling trapped by his body heat, his girth, too warm and wriggly to stay put. He pulls her closer and refuses to oblige her body trying to worm her way free.

What if she can’t get the voices to simmer down anymore?

What if they won’t retreat into their cells after this?
What if abandonment is coming for her, like before, like always, how would she ever recover, who would ever be this to her again, how could anyone ever be Ben for her again?

How could she survive it?

What if she’s ruined?

What if he destroys her?

What if she ruins him?

Do you even get more than one love of your life, like Ben is for her?

Do all Hollywood actors get more than one?

Didn’t Lawrence Olivier have three wives?

What would make this any different for Ben?

How will she make it when Ben leaves?

When is he leaving?

Is it today?

Does he already know?

Is it soon?

Her head swirls with confusion and worry as Lydia and Wickham are married, Jane accepts Bingley and Darcy professes his love to Lizzie - again - and Uncle Larry wins the girl in the movie, dark hair and top hat and cravat, charm exuding as the movie ends.

She may not be a noisy crier but, she is a practiced one so, Rey has already been wiping tears away, unbeknownst to Ben for 10 minutes when Lizzie and Darcy walk off into the sunset in an a final, blissful embrace and he sits up to stretch, reaching back from her lap and sees her wiping tears away silently.

“Baby!” Ben croons, surprised to see her crying, scooting towards her on the couch, wiping her tearful face in tandem with her own flustered hands as she apologizes.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Rey assures him, embarrassed. She’s worried he can see the tornado of fear tumbling around her head from where he sits beside her and she believes maybe he can, judging from the look on his face.

“I mean, the movie was good but, it wasn’t that good,” he says, trying out a bit of lighthearted
joking to see if that’ll do the trick, smiling at her softly, stroking her face and hair, his elbow on the back of the couch.

Rey steadier herself as she breathes.

If he really wants her, if he really wants to build a life with her she’d better start being a woman about it and use her big girl words.

No time like the present, and no present like time, she thinks.

She who is brave is free, she reminds herself.

“Ben,” she says, looking up at the ceiling above them, wetting her lips, trying to piece together what she wants to tell him, what she needs to figure out, what she wants to hear from him, “why do you think this will work between us?”

“Rey,” he says, seriousness settling in his eyes as he takes her face in his hands and holds it very firmly, “because we love each another. Because I love you. Because we belong to each other. Because I will not let you go.” He is resolute. She hears it in his tone.

“But, you’re famous,” she argues, “you’re crazy famous. Ben, you’re a movie star. And I run a tiny, little video store in Tennessee. What kind of sense does that make?”

“Wait a minute. Where is this coming from?” he asks, “what is going on right now? Because I just watched a movie with my girl and got to eat her out and I look up and you’re losing it over some old black and white movie that has nothing to do with us. What am I missing here?”

He’s not angry he’s just very confused, Rey can tell.

She’s been stuck in her head instead of stuck on this couch and mentally she’s been a million miles away even though he’s been beside her the whole time.

“You said it yourself,” she goes on, “your Uncle Larry was famous and he was married three times and he died sad. I don’t want to be married three times. I don’t want you to be married three times. I don’t know how to do this. I am scared I don’t know how to do this,” she says, crying fresh tears, fear overwhelming.

Ben’s eyes have mastered this effect of being tender with her and simultaneously fervently aflame,
and it’s this look he gives her now as he peers into her eyes and pushes his words firmly across their bond into her mind, his hands on her cheeks and cupping her head almost shaking her gently with emphasis as he speaks.

“I want you to listen to me. Look in my eyes and listen to me. Are you listening?” he asks, going on when Rey nods.

“People who make movies are not special. They are not superhuman. They are not gods. They are just people who make movies. They’re not more special than anyone else, definitely not more special than you, baby, trust me, I have met them and just because there’s a camera pointed at them to tape them saying some lines, that doesn’t make them special. I am not special. I am a man, just a man, but, I am your man and you are my woman and it’s as simple as that. The rest of this is bullshit. Larry had three wives because he maybe was a shit husband, how the fuck do I know, all I know is, I love you and I am not interested in any other girl. It’s you, Rey. You’re for me. Period. Do you hear me? Movie star, not a movie star…fucking, I don’t know, garbage man, no matter who I am, you’re the girl for me.”

Rey reads his eyes and feels him pull her close to kiss her through her damp face, her lips swelled with tearfulness and she eases herself onto the couch as Ben lays on top of her, kissing her pain away, giving herself over to the relief of his words, playing them over and over in her heart, letting them flood into herself, washing the floors, the walls, the corridors, the windows until they sparkle, scrubbed clean with a balm only he can give her.

“You are special,” she tells him, nose to nose, all whispers and dried tears, desire and adoration, “you are all I want, Ben, you’re all I want.”

“I love you,” he reminds her again, embracing her and squeezing his truth into her body as if by sheer strength alone he could will her to believe it enough, “I’m yours. And I will show you, Rey. If that’s what you need, I will just show you.”

All she can do is kiss him.

All she can do is love him.

All she can do is climb into the boat he’s rowed to her shore and climb in beside him, lost without him and lost within him for sure, now.

There is no choice to make, she is his.
To: Rose, Gun

5:03 pm

Happy New Year!

Pancakes at Aretha’s together

just us 4, tomorrow AM? xox

- Reyrey

“When are you coming out to California?” Ben asks, balancing a gallon of ice cream in one huge hand between them, both he and Rey digging in with spoons, sharing something vanilla stuffed with random candy pieces throughout.

“I dunno,” Rey says, sifting around in the smooth dessert for more candy, stopping to pop a satisfying chunk of Reese’s into her mouth from her spoon, hearing her phone respond.

To: Rey

From: Rose

5:10 pm

Sure, Gun goes into work

at 1 pm, what time do you wanna meet?

- Rosie

“Rose says ‘yes’,” Rey tells her boyfriend, who has taken her reprieve as she’s answering a text with Rose to set up breakfast plans for the next day to scramble and scoop out all the candy he can find.

“Cool,” he says, holding up his spoon and offering Rey a bite while she texts, miming along as she opens her mouth to be fed a bite of ice cream with a cluster of M&M’s inside.

To: Rose, Gun
From: Rey
5:12 pm

Yay!

Does 9am work for y’all?

- Reyrey

“What about Valentine’s?” Ben says, when Rey puts the phone in her lap again and spoons a bite for herself.

“What about it?” Rey asks, adding, “Are you stealing all the Reese’s?”

“Yes,” he says, with a mischievous grin, pulling the carton away from her a little, teasing, “for Valentine’s, come to California.”

To: Rey
From: Rose
5:15 pm

Perfect.

Enjoy your night!

See you in the AM

<3

xox

- Rosie

“What did you say?” Rey asks, trying to focus on a texting conversation, an actual conversation with Ben and ice cream all at once, not to mention having her boyfriend’s body tangled with hers on the bed where they are still hanging out after sex.

“Come to California,” Ben repeats, exasperated, “for Valentine’s. Or hell, for anytime, I don’t care, just come,” he says, scooping a massive bite into his mouth. “I’ll be done filming in Canada and back there by the start of February. Come as soon as you can.”
Rey takes a bite of ice cream and stalls, picking through for the candy, avoiding answering until Ben realizes it and says, “Rey.”

Her hand stills.

“I’ve never been to California,” she says. “I have never been on an airplane,” she admits, finally looking up at him.

“I was going to do it for Christmas, I was just going to get on a plane and just do it, come to Aspen but, I didn’t end up having the chance. But, it would have been the first time. Ever. So, yeah. Sort of a big deal for me,” she says, feeling poor and unanchored, just a wisp of a person who hasn’t had much life experience to ground her in the worldliness Ben has experienced, a world-traveler since before he was born.

“Ah,” he says thoughtfully, considering, putting down the ice cream on the table beside her bed, his spoon beside it, and reaching for hers, too. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Rey takes a look at his beautiful, naked chest, his massive, sculpted arms, his captivating face, all raw emotion and restrained strength and remembers again why people all over the world pay to see it on a big screen, why women throw themselves at him and scream his name in crowds everywhere he goes and she all she can do is shrug.

How can it be she is here in bed with him?

Aren’t there dozens, maybe hundreds or even thousands of women who are more worthy to be here right now?

Naked, loved, sated beside him, happy to accept his offers of plane tickets and exotic locales and love?

And here she is, frightened and anxious and inexperienced.

“Because look at you,” she says, pointing halfheartedly to him, his chest, his impressive stature and lack of fears, “you’re big and strong and you travel all over the planet all the time and you’re so handsome and amazing…you don’t fear anything.”

“Are you kidding?” he says, shock in his eyes. “Are you kidding me? Not afraid of anything? Rey, baby, I am afraid all the time,” he says, choking on a laugh.

“I’m afraid of letting everyone down. I’m afraid of the movie flopping. I’m afraid of how much
money the studio fronted to make a film and afraid it’ll be a bust and no one will get their money back and it’ll be because I suck. I’m afraid of failing. I’m afraid of turning out like my fucking father. Or my mother. I’m afraid of getting drunk and fucking everything up again and being a worthless junkie. I’m afraid of not being worthy of you, of losing you, of you leaving me when you see what a dick I can be,” he tells her.

“But, none of those things is going to happen,” Rey says simply, no question, she has listed why in her heart with every confided fear and she can tell him absolutely, those things will not happen. “I know it,” she states with complete certainty.

“Well, I don’t know it,” he says, “I feel afraid all the time, I just keep moving. I’ve never been allowed to stop moving,” he says, letting his head fall to the pillow.

“Ben, you’re not going to fail,” Rey says, intent on convincing him. “It’s not possible. It’s not who you are.” she tells him, kissing his knuckles.

“What are you so easy on me?” he asks, moving closer, wrapping himself around her. “Why are you so good to me?”

“I love the hell out of you,” she says, kissing him. “And I’ll even get on a plane for you, if you want,” she says, knowing it ultimately to be true.

“Baby, you are the most incredible girl I’ve ever known, do you know that?” he asks her, one hand reaching behind her head, through the curtain of her hair. “There is no one on earth like you. No one. You are what I need, Rey. You’re what I need. Just you.”

Rey looks at him, touching him, feeling calm. She considers and just leans in and lets herself receive.

“I don’t want us apart,” he says, kissing her and looking into her eyes when he’s said it, “I mean it, Rey, I don’t want to be apart from you.”

“Me too,” she says, smiling and wrapping her legs around his under the covers. “I’m yours, Ben Solo. I promise,” truer words never spoken.

“That’s fuckin’ right,” he snarls lovingly, rolling her onto her back, kissing her neck till she screeches with glee.
“We’ll figure it out,” she says, feeling her man kiss her over and over, “okay?”

She feels him nod into her neck and she runs her hands over his shoulders and back, a thrill running through her she knows what his skin feels like by heart now.

“How about I’ll run a bath and we can go get in together,” she offers, as he leaves love bites on her neck, towards her shoulder.

“Right behind you, baby doll,” he says, squeezing her before rolling off of her to the side, letting Rey rise.

There’s no residue but joy and delirious beauty to show for the year yet as Rey relaxes back against her boyfriend’s chest, between his knees in the bubbles that surround them, the water sloshing amply generously over the sides of the standard porcelain edges onto the honeycomb, penny-sized tiles below.

Nothing but sweetness this whole year so far, she realizes, it’s fresh with no mistakes in it, she thinks, like Anne Shirley.

There’s only been plenty of delicious sex with her beautiful man, two happy bellies, two hearts overfilled with love and contentment, two souls twined together like climbing vines, two lives reaching to twist into one the higher they stretch like a DNA ladder, like a pair of birds dancing in the sky, like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and Rey hums “Cheek to Cheek” enjoying the words about two lovers, lost in love from Top Hat, a scene she knows so well but, never understood till Ben.

“Heaven, I’m in Heaven,
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak;
And I seem to find the happiness I seek
When we’re out together dancing, cheek to cheek.”

It’s easy to feel herself in heaven right now, her man behind her, the bubbles buoyant around her, the sweetness of the ice cream on her tongue, her heart light, all the whispers silenced.

Tomorrow the new year will be a day older but, Rey will still be with Ben and it’s that thought she
wraps around them both beneath her quilt as they nestle into bed together that night as she imagines a plane winging her to the ocean, glimmering blue and endless, unknown but, promising, just like the year lying before her.

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Chapter End Notes

darling reader,
a few thoughts:

1) though this was a very cerebral chapter, and though we spent a good deal of time enjoying domestic fluff the last couple chapters, next week we move the plot forward. I think it's important to remember this ain't the Ben Solo Story, it's the female power narrative as told by a woman working through her own piles of trauma shit and I think she will decide for herself what and who she needs. Let's watch.

2) this is Notting Hill, Jane Eyre, and Star Wars INSPIRED, not a literal re-telling so, even though something *may* have happened in the canon of those stories, no promises it's happening here. I am writing fiction because I get to write alternatives and be the control freak I wanna be so, that means FLUFF REIGNS SUPREME.

3) I love you all to teeny bits and pieces.

4) my personal belief based on personal experience is Soulmates Belong Together and True Love Works if You Work It. I am a child of divorce but, also a wife IRL so, I understand what I am saying when I say Together Is Better. Healing, in my experience, is group effort almost always and love is a powerful healing agent. Healing apart is possible and can be very good. For the purpose of this fictional work, based on my life experience though, even though maybe additional angst and separation would be good for gaining hits and comments because people love that ish, we are exploring something different: namely NOT breaking up. There's plenty of hard work to be done, even once you love one another. The case could be made, in fact, THAT'S when the Real Work begins. Again, let's watch.

5) did I say how much I love you, reader? I do.

xo
Berry
Risk

Chapter Summary

moodboard obviously thanks to the incomparable rileybabe
beta’d obviously thanks to the invaluable uselessenglishmajor

Ben's POV, True North Chapter 6 drops tomorrow, Tuesday, May 8

xo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“It is a risk to love.

What if it doesn’t work out?

Ah, but what if it does.”

- Peter McWilliams
Sleeping in would have been magical beside Ben in her bed but, Rey woke shivering, even underneath two quilts and Ben’s arm slung over her when her eyes opened on January second.

She lay there in bed half-awake, struggling to remember what day it was, what time it could possibly be, still dark outside and she realized her nose was numb from cold.

Her hair, still damp from their bath the night before was chilled on her head in a bun and the wind howling slightly beyond the window made her shiver and sink closer against the wall of heat coming from her boyfriend’s body, still sound asleep in the blackened room.

3:02 am the clock on her phone blinked up at her when she touched the screen on the bedside table beside her.

The pipes, she thought, realizing it had to be cold enough for the pipes to burst, remembering when she had lived through that in a foster home at age 16.

Her foster mom and dad, as well as their two kids and Rey had been away overnight at a set of grandparents for Christmas in Nashville where Rey had been gifted a set of lavender hand lotion even though she vehemently despised the scent, and a lovely set of stationary, the only set she’d ever had, embossed with an “R”, something they’d clearly meant just for her, which was the nicest gift she could recall ever receiving, especially from a foster family.

When they’d travelled back the next day after an ice storm, over the hills of Nashville and back into the mountains of Chattanooga though, they were greeted by 6 inches of standing water all through the house, the pipes having frozen and sprayed water through the two-story home for hours by then.

Parts of the ceiling had fallen in the living room, the fridge had to be emptied and the carpeting, half the furniture and all of Rey’s belongings which stood piled neatly in a corner of the floor of the bedroom she shared with the foster family daughter were thoroughly ruined.

She learned after that to leave her stuff in a black trash bag and never unpack again, no matter how long she was in a home, just another reason to keep her things stashed safely, bagged up, ready for easy removal.

This apartment was the first place she had unpacked what she owned from the parade of black trash bags she’d lugged all over town with her scant belongings and she wasn’t about to live the same scenario of a flooded house again if she had any say in it.

“Baby? Where you going?” Ben grumbled, sleepy, unable to make out what was happening in the half light of dawn, spreading his hands over Rey’s recently emptied warm spot in the bed beside
“Shhhhh,” Rey whispered, “it’s okay. I gotta wrap the pipes so they don’t freeze and burst,” she told him hurriedly, quiet so as not to wake him completely, hoping he’d go back to sleep even as she pulled on sweat pants up to her skimpy tank top and over the lacy boyshorts she’d worn to bed last night, back when she was toasty from the luxuriously long, warm bath.

That seemed like a million years ago, here in the bedroom where she was convinced she could almost see her breath.

“Shit,” Ben said, climbing out of bed, his bare feet hitting the parquet flooring, naked except for underwear, hopping around for pants, “so cold,” he shivered, pulling on clothes.

“Don’t get up, it’s okay,” Rey said, pulling her arms though a fluffy robe and tying it around her middle, “stay in bed, I got this.”

“We’ll do it together,” he said, pulling a hoodie over his chest and running his hands through his hair, leaning down to kiss Rey’s lips quickly, “it’ll go quicker.”

*Many hands make light work,* Rey thought, grateful for her man who never let her get away with pushing him away.

She grabbed a role of duct tape decorated with Minions from her kitchen junk drawer, one she’d bought to wrap Finn’s last birthday present in, and a handful of clean bath towels from beneath the bathroom sink and she and Ben wordlessly wrapped towels around each pipe carefully, a seamless team, securing them with the silly tape covered in blue denim-clad, banana-colored creatures.

Rey turned off the hot water beneath each sink, turning the knob till it protested and then ran all the hot water out of her pipes, draining them, hoping her landlord had also turned off the hot water tank in another part of the building.

Finally finished and tired again, she turned her heat up to 60 and climbed into bed with Ben, leaving her robe at the foot of the bed, another layer over her, and snuggled into his arms. She audibly sighed and curled into him as closely as she could, burrowing into his bare chest like a woodland creature in a den, her legs trapped between his own, and she savored being enveloped by his huge body.

Not for the first time she appreciated how large a human man he was, and she let herself get carried away to sleep beside him, protected from the cold, from the wind, from the water, sleepy
and safe.

She dreamed of a house, of water rising and of Ben in a boat, helping her in and rowing her away and she trailed her hand in the water beside as he rowed, her fingers skimming the rippling waters, her heart at ease even though all around her a crumbling house and the sky above them fell bit by bit into the water around the boat, her eyes on Ben’s, her smile secure on her face.

*******

This time when she woke, the scent of central heating wafted towards her comfortingly and her eyes flew open as she shot up in bed to inspect the flooring, making sure there wasn’t a flood around the bed, before throwing herself backward again in relief beside Ben the floor was still dry, the pipes had not burst, the air in the apartment was warmer and all was not lost.

“Hi,” she greeted her man beside her with a kiss on his shoulder, closing her eyes dreamily again, gathering the last moments of placid quiet around her like the quilt above them.

“Morning, beautiful,” Ben said, pulling her closer to himself, tucking her head under his chin without ever opening his eyes.

“Ben,” she began, “when are you leaving?” Rey was loathe to ask but, she’d been awake on and off for so many hours already it felt like half the day was gone even though it was barely 7:30 and she was beginning to feel Ben’s departure bear down on her like a heavy, winged creature hovering above her.

“Dinner time,” he said, “call time tomorrow is 9 am on set so, I gotta get up there tonight,” he explained. “Flight’s at around 6, I think.”

Shooting for the Brontë project began in Toronto tomorrow, bright and early, January 3rd and there was no way around it, he had to leave today.

“Okay, well, let’s get going,” Rey said, determined to make the best of it, moving to crawl out of the comfortably warm bed but, Ben held her tightly and refused to let her go, yet.

“Not yet,” he objected, encasing her stubbornly.
Rey sunk down again but, her mind raced, antsy and irritated and the day marched mercilessly.

She only had a few hours left with him.

She wanted to make the best of it.

She wanted it to last.

But, it wouldn’t.

Time was slipping away.

There wasn’t enough time to lay here anymore and she needed to get up.

She huffed a little but kissed his chest and pulled back. “Gotta get going,” she said. “Meeting Rosie and Gun.”

“Hey, relax,” he said, all West Coast laziness and relaxation, opening his eyes to see her climb out of bed without eye contact.

“What’s the hurry?” he asked, stretching and when she said nothing, responding to the upbeat vibe in Rey’s tone and chipper movements, cutting them down to the marrow instantly, he said, “talk to me.”

“What’s there to talk about? We have to get going so we aren’t late, that’s all. And then you have to go,” Rey said, pulling back and removing herself from his hands, pulling on her robe and layering herself in protection, tying her belt around her robe like armor, pushing her messy strands of fallen hair into the bun on her head like a crown of dignity, her chin high with the facade of immunity.

Ben furrowed his brow as she moved around the room, straightening and tidying and collecting herself. He pulled both hands behind his head and studied her from the same spot in bed, head on pillow and frowned at her busy movements.

“Rey,” he started, “…baby.”

“What?” she asked, scooping discarded clothing off the floor, shooting them one at a time in the laundry basket of her closet, gathering pillows and shoes and coffee mugs, yesterday’s spoons and remnants of vacationing together, “you’re leaving,” she said, “I’m getting used to it.”
This was all somehow happening without Rey’s approval, her behavior and conflicting thoughts.

Her heart hadn’t asked permission to emote yet today, and she wasn’t sure why she was being so passive aggressive all of a sudden but, she felt it her only course of action to counteract the sadness swelling up in her like a slowly-inflating balloon.

She didn’t want to cry, she wasn’t used to feeling so deeply and for God’s sake, why was this man she was so in love with causing her so much fucking grief all the time?

How was *that* fair?

She hadn’t cried this much her whole life, the way she had this last year and she was sort of sick of it, sick of emoting, and sick of herself so the only thing to do was move on with a stiff upper lip and stuff it all down.

*Chin up, buttercup,* she prompted herself as she headed for the bathroom.

Ben was out of bed, standing in the doorway of the bathroom as she splashed cold water on her face, the freezing chill numbing her cheeks, her nose, her fingertips, drops rolling down her hands and arms into the sleeves of her robe, saturating it from the inside annoyingly.

“You’re mad at me,” he ventured, arms crossed over muscular chest, brow furrowed, having pulled on jeans, leaning against the doorframe studying her.

“I’m not mad.” Rey said, muffled behind a towel as she scrubbed her face dry. “How could I be mad? You’re here and you have to go. I get it.”

“Rey,” he began before Rey silenced him with a pat on his arm as she walked past him into the hallway.

“Baby,” he began again, following her as she moved towards the closet to pick out clothes to wear to breakfast, “let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Ben,” she said, pulling jeans and a sweater from the closet and throwing them on the bed as she untied her robe. “You’re leaving, I’m staying, this is how it works.”

“I mean…” he runs his hands through his hair as he sits on the bed watching her tensely go through
the motions of dressing, fighting with her jeans, “it’s not what I want, you know it’s not what I want.”

“Well, this is just how it is, I guess, no matter what we want,” she said, huffing as she gets tangled in a sweater, yanking it over her head miserably, pulling her still-drying hair from the bun as she does so, fine hair falling over her face when she emerges.

“C’mere,” Ben said, pulling her by the wrist onto the bed beside him.

Rey let herself melt onto the bed, unable to withstand the comfort of his body sheltering hers even like this, even when she was mad at something she couldn’t put her finger on, even when she was tightly wound and annoyed.

“Is this how it’s gonna be now?” she asked, her head against Ben’s shoulder, looking at his knee beside her, his arm around her tight, his lips on her hair. “You’re just gonna show up and breeze in for a few days and sleep with me a few times and fly off somewhere again?”

The sadness wrapped in her words relayed hopelessness and it sounded as dire as it felt but, she was disappointed in herself she had given that much away with her tone. She wasn’t trying to make him feel guilty, she just couldn’t quite get her words to sound less pathetic than they had.

“I mean baby, I don’t know what to tell you,” he said, his tone offering the helplessness he obviously felt, “you know I have to go. And you know I don’t want to be away from you. You know I want us together…I want you with me. I need you with me, Rey. I don’t know what to tell you but, I will tell you this, Rey,” he said, pulling her chin to face him so she looked into his eyes beside her, “I love you. You’re my girl. Even when I leave, I am not leaving you. You have me, baby.”

Rey feels her traitorous eyes fill with tears and she leans in to let him kiss her forehead, letting him press his sentiment into her heart, into her brain, into her acceptance and she wraps her arms around him.

“We’re gonna figure this out, okay?” Ben asks, tipping her chin up to look into his eyes, even if they’re spilling tears against her will. “You love me?” he asks.

“I love you, Ben,” she tells him, “I do. I just love you too much.”

“Uh, no,” he says, considering thoughtfully, “that is not a thing. There’s no such thing as you love me ‘too much’,” he says, leaning to kiss her lips.
“There is,” she argues, “it makes me possessive and crazy and irrational and fucking emotional,” she says, kissing him more fiercely between every few words.

“Maybe I like you emotional,” he argues back, “maybe I want you crazy and possessive, huh?” He’s pulling at her, twisting her body towards himself, his tongue dipping into her mouth, his words darkening.

“Maybe you don’t know what you’re getting into,” she threatens, moving to straddle him.

“Maybe you could show me, and let me decide what I want to get into,” he suggests provocatively, one hand running up into her hair, the other stretching into the back of her panties under her jeans around her bottom.

“But, the time…” she murmurs as she presses her tongue into his mouth, her hips rising to grind against him, her words at complete odds with her actions, even though she knows their breakfast double date with Rose and Gun is approaching.

“There’s time,” he says into the skin of her throat under his lips.

“There’s time,” he insists, lifting, pulling her sweater back off again, unhooking her bra and lifting her breasts to his mouth, unbuttoning her jeans and inching his fingers into her, convincing her with each lick, each touch that he’s right, he’s so right, there’s time, oh God, yes there’s time and why is he so good at this, oh my God I love him so much and oh God, he’s right there is time, there is plenty of goddamn time, there is all the time in the world for her to get fucked by her boyfriend and fucking hell why does his cock have to be so fucking big and perfect and holy shit, and his hands, oh God, this man's hands, how does he know how to hit that spot, how can he feel so good, how can it feel this good, how can he make me feels so good and oh my God, oh God, yesyesyesyesyes please, Ben, God, yes, oh my God, yes just like that oh God, yes, Ben, fuck me, fuck me, oh God, Ben, Ben, Ben…….

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“Hi!” Rose chirped, hugging Rey around the neck, her button nose red from standing in the cold, where she and Gun had been waiting for a table for the four of them to be called and seated inside for breakfast.

She slipped her arm through Rey’s, bouncing a little at the temperature and excitement, having a double date with her best friend and their boyfriends, Rey knew, aware that Rose’s emotions normally found a number of ways to express themselves as they made their way easily from her
heart to the world around her.

It was Rey’s favorite thing about Rose besides her loyalty, and she smiled at the infectious joy it brought her, banishing her lingering sorrow about Ben’s pending departure.

“We’ve got about 5 more minutes to wait,” she said, tugging Rey close and huddling them together outside the restaurant, known for its’ tight spaces, few tables, humungous pancakes and Charleston-style shrimp and grits.

“You guys have a good day yesterday?” Gun asked, having greeted Ben with a manly slap on one another’s backs already, each huffing slightly into their hands to stay warm, having lost their respective girlfriends’ warmth as Rey and Rose huddled together in a bundle of frozen sisterhood.

“Yeah, lots of R&R,” Ben nodded, easily smiling and looking at Rey with amusement as she hopped around with Rose to stay warm.

“When are you leaving?” Rose asked Ben, always looking out for Rey, always looking to compensate, used to seeing Rey left alone and hoping to anticipate ways to head that off at the pass for her best friend this time.

“Tonight,” Rey said, answering instead, aware that Rose was trying to suss things out and preferring to present a united, cheerful front about it for now, unwilling to let their brunch together get sidetracked into a forlorn affair, unwilling to think about his departure for now.

“They have the best pancakes here,” she offered to Ben instead, still standing connected to Rose, changing the conversation in a way that insisted they not continue to cover the topic for now.

“Scott, party of 4,” the hostess shouted, poking her head out of the front door, menus in hand, beckoning them inside the restored, tiny house, refurbished to accommodate seating for 20 at quaint, eclectic tables and a bar top that faced a wall of griddles, perfect for flipping flapjacks, grilling sandwiches and filling beer on tap.

Rose and Rey headed for the front steps of the porch leading to the ancient Craftsmen house when 4 college students, pierced and hair dyed stepped into their path, blocking the entrance and pulling out phones.

Immediately, Rey knew where this was heading, and she braced.
Apparently, Ben had been spotted, she knew.

“Kylo Ren! Kylo Ren! It’s Kylo Ren!” she heard them murmuring, the chant moving through the small crowd all around them, everyone who had gathered on the front lawn and sidewalk awaiting tables for brunch overhearing and moving towards them in sync.

“Where?”

“Kylo Ren?”

“Who’s here?”

“Where is he?”

“Oh my God, that’s him!”

“Can we have a photo?”

“Can we have an autograph?”

“Can we get a selfie with you?”

“Oh my God, my niece will die!”

“I’m your biggest fan!”

“Move, I can’t see!”

“Where is he?”

“It’s Kylo Ren, come here!”

Rose and Rey jostled as people moved in from all angles to approach Ben, until a pack of humans 20 deep surrounded him, cutting them off completely.

Rey heard Ben’s voice, calm and kind, low and in control, and she compared it to her wildly erratic heart pounding in her chest, her fight-or-flight response kicking in, panic creeping up her spine and arms, her face burning with anxiety.

“Move!”

“You move!”

“I was here first!”

“I can’t see!”

“I was here first, dickwad!”
“I said move it, asshole!”

The crowd was getting noisier, pushing and starting to shove, Rose got elbowed and the tension around the circumference changed into something more charged, Ben still in the center of a storm, taller than everyone else and collected.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough,” Gun’s voice boomed just loudly enough, pushing the crowd back from Ben’s frame with his presence, his hands on his hips, just his tone and insistence creating space between the group of pestering fans and Ben, even without his sheriff’s deputy uniform.

“Back up, back up,” he said calmly, the crowd shifting a few steps to accommodate both Ben and Gun’s presence, deflecting to him in unison, his intimidating bearing creating some space and sanity for everyone, Gun’s commanding air somehow influencing the circle of people into recognizing Ben as a human and not a trophy, and the tension eased.

Rey felt her heart slow down slightly and she let Rose’s hand loosen in her own, realizing she had been gripping it white in her own.

“Let’s take a group picture,” Ben suggested to the small mob of people around him, “everybody get in, everybody get in,” he encouraged, sweeping people in with his hands, “somebody gimme a phone,” he commanded and someone obliged, handing him a phone.

Rey watched as the pack of people crowded around, craning necks and standing on toes to crush into Ben, whose long arms spanned high enough to capture everyone present in the mass around him in the frame, before shouting, “Alright, on the count of three…one! Two! Three!” and snapping a series of photos, everyone smiling innocently and happily, no sign of in-fighting remaining.

Ben handed the phone back to its owner and Rey heard him telling everyone whose shoulder he patted as he passed, heading for Rey and Rose who were closer to the front entrance, “nice to meet you, too…yeah…sure thing…well, I’m sure they’ll text it to you…nice to meet you, too…”

“Hey, no fair,” Rey heard a voice complain, turning and seeing a large, unhappy man swiftly approaching Ben from behind, “we want our own picture!”

Gun stepped in between Ben and the approaching man instinctively, his stance leaving no room for argument, his Marine training and sheriff deputy persona colliding in one impressive moment of
purely alpha display as he held out one hand straight in front of himself and said, “back. up.”

“We want another picture,” the man said, his feet slowing, his tone complaining.

“My brother and I here are taking our girls to breakfast. You all got your photo, now give us a break,” Gun said, his arms crossed over his chest, legs widely planted.

No one was getting at Ben anymore, it was clear, not unless they wanted to go through Gun and Rey doubted very much any sane person would want to try to do so.

Ben moved towards Rose and Rey, took them both by an elbow and led them up the porch steps and into the restaurant, leaving Gun to deal with the rest of the disturbance.

By the time Gun joined them at the small four-top table by the back of the restaurant, Rey’s heart rate had settled again, Ben’s arm was tight around her shoulders while he looked at a menu and Rose reached up and kissed her boyfriend as he sat down beside her, pride beaming from her like a sunburst.

“Hot damn, that was sexy, Officer Scott,” she said, nuzzling his nose with her own, making him chuckle.

“Thanks, man,” Ben said, patting Gun on the back, “you’re a lifesaver.”

“Anytime, brother,” Gun said, dismissing it, “no big deal.”

Rey exhaled a breath she’d been holding and shot Gun a smile of thanks across the table before looking down at the menu, though she didn’t need to. Her head swam with fullness, the adrenaline still subsiding, the pancake scent permeating everything in the small building, the tight square of the four of them surrounding the table together, a pact of friendship winding around them tightly.

She peeked up and reminisced about coming to this eatery with Rose as college students themselves, talking about their exploits in school, complaining about boy problems, lamenting about grades, wondering when their lives would begin and she smiled covertly, thinking how wonderful to be here with grown-up men who loved them each, still navigating life together.

“I don’t need this thing,” Gun said, dropping the menu in his lap and pouring Rose a cup of coffee from the decanter in the center of the table and handing it to her as he said, “here, babe.”
“Only one thing to get at Aretha Frankenstein’s, after all, thank you, babe,” Rose affirmed, dropping her own menu and taking the cup from Gun as she added ample cream and sugar to her coffee.

“Pancakes,” Rey announced, dropping her own menu right on cue, announcing the foregone conclusion for everyone, causing Ben to drop his as well, and agree, “sounds good to me.”

Rey snuggled into Ben’s arm happily, enjoying the moment to relax beside him in public, aware of how few times they’d had this opportunity and she ordered orange juice to accompany her coffee when the server came to take orders, everyone unanimously agreeing on pancake stacks.

“So, ‘Mr. Renchester’,” Rose began, speaking to Ben, setting her mug down on the table, “that’s what they’ve dubbed you now, eh?”

“Have they?” Ben asked, taking a sip of coffee, “hadn’t heard that one before.”

“Yeah, that’s what I see online,” she affirmed, “I keep up, you know, and that’s the latest. Ren. Rochester. Renchester. Cute.”

“Who’s Rochester?” Gun asked, handing out plates of pancakes as they arrived, drowning his in syrup before taking a massive bite.

“Mr. Rochester,” Rey said, “the devastatingly handsome, quintessential Byronic hero of Jane Eyre. He’s Ben’s next role and he is going to crush it,” she said, looking up at Ben beside her with a grin.

“Well, that remains to be seen,” Ben said, eschewing praise, “we don’t even start shooting till tomorrow and frankly, I’m nervous as hell. Been a long time since I played anybody but Ren and they’re very big shoes to fill.”

“Meh, lucky ya got big feet,” Gun said, not even looking up from his food, shoveling in an even bigger bite, causing Rose to roll her eyes at him.

“You’re going to be amazing,” Rey said, taking a bite of pancakes after making sure the butter was spread all the way to each edge meticulously, dunking every bite in a ceramic bowl of syrup.
completely before savoring every bite.

“Well, Solo, we’ll be thinking of you as you go,” Rose said, taking a bite of her own pancakes, whipped cream topping smothering hers.

“Ugh, I gotta get this, sorry, baby doll,” Ben said, wiping his mouth and moving away from the table to answer a phone call.

“You ok? With him leaving today?” Rose asked Rey once Ben had left the table and was out of earshot.

“No,” Rey admitted, sulking slightly, dunking a bite of her breakfast in syrup before watching it drip onto her plate, held aloft while Rey stared down at it, the food in her belly turning to concrete as she let herself think about Ben leaving.

She wasn’t okay, she didn’t know how to be okay and she was in no hurry to get back to the business of being alone again.

It was only January 2nd.

Her brutal December wasn’t that far behind her, after all.

“I’m here for you, okay?” Rose said, reaching a hand across the table to pat Rey’s, “anything you need, I’m here. Okay?”

“Thanks, Rosie,” Rey said, “I know.”

Rey had a sinking feeling she could find comfort in Rose’s house, could find it in Finn and Poe’s antics, in Paige’s sisterhood and Gun’s protection of her but, she felt her heart somersault as she realized it would not suffice.

What worked best for comfort now was Ben.

A whisper called up from beneath her heart’s floorboards, a distant echo of loss and threat of emptiness and she swallowed a bite of breakfast and sent it down in response.
“Hey,” Ben said, sitting down again, taking a bite of pancakes as he pulled his chair in and dropped a napkin back into his lap. “Sorry about that, guys.”

Rey looked up at him beside her and saw a shadow cross his face as he met her eyes and her heart dropped into her belly, her eyes widening slightly as she realized his eyes were sad.

“What was that?” she asked, afraid to know the answer.

“Hux,” Ben said, knowing that one word alone had the power to undo happiness, change plans and spell doom.

“He says there’s a winter storm moving down a jet stream from the Rockies towards us, and it’s going to be a big one that will likely mess up flight schedules for half the country. I have a private flight out at 1 to beat it. He’s got a plane set up already.”

“Oh,” Rey said, her shoulders slumping and her spirit wilting like an unwatered flower. “Okay,” she agreed reluctantly, her voice a meek sigh of resignation.

“Wow,” Rose said, “that’s fast.” Her words are for Ben but, her eyes are on Rey who is deflating like a punctured helium balloon.

“Baby,” Ben says, turning in his chair to face Rey, taking her hand in his, “come with me.”

Rey turns to Ben and looks at his face, hope peeking out from between all the gears she can see turning in his head as he thinks through strategy.

“But…” she begins to debate but, is hushed as Ben continues.

“Come with me. Come be with me. Please, Rey. Come on, come to Canada. Just for a few days,” he continues.

“But, Resistance…” she begins again.

“Finn’s home,” Ben answers, “and he just had a whole week off while you covered, it’ll be fine.”
“My apartment…” she starts, and Rose jumps in, interrupting.

“I can check on your apartment, Reyrey,” Rose offers, a tiny smile at the corner of her mouth.

“But…but…what will I do there? I’ll be all alone…” Rey contends, knowing she’s about to be without any argument and she’s afraid - she’s legitimately afraid and has no idea what she’s getting herself into and this is all happening so fast.

“I’m not asking you to be alone, Rey. You’ll be with me,” Ben says to her, taking both hands in his own, “on the plane, in the trailer, at the hotel, on the set, you’re with me, baby doll. You and me. We’re together.”

“I…I…” Rey is flummoxed.

This shouldn’t be so hard to decide.

Her boyfriend is offering to sweep her away on a trip with him - again - and it’s such an intoxicating offer, she feels her head is too light to identify anything she might be missing.

“Rey. Please,” Ben says, his eyes pursuing hers as they dart around nervously, “I want you with me. Come with me. Just for a couple days. Say yes. Trust me. Please.”

Her eyes settle on his as she ponders.

Adventure is out there, she thinks.

Life is short, she thinks.

No risk, no reward, she thinks.

A ship is always safe at shore but, that is not what it’s built for, she remembers.

A ship.

Shore.

Ben rowing.
She remembers the smile on her own face in her dream and she looks across at Rose who is grinning at her.

“Go for it,” Rose prompts and Rey looks up at Ben again.

“Okay,” she says, squeezing his hands.

“Yeah?” he says, a wide smile breaking over his face, pulling her close.

“Yeah,” Rey says, kissing him hard on his sweet mouth, all happiness and success.

“Yeah?” Ben asks again, apparently having a hard time believing she’s agreed.

“Yes!” Rey laughs at him, her cheeks getting peppered with kisses as she giggles.

Rey smiles at Rose across the table as she finishes the last bite of her pancakes and downs her juice, pushing her chair back as she finds the fuel in her tummy and the love for Ben in her heart propelling her into action.

“Welp,” she announces, “I gotta go pack. Apparently, I am going to Canada with my boyfriend!”

“Have fun!” Rose says, squeezing her when Rey bends for a hug, “I’ll text you.”

“Thanks, guys,” Ben says, leaving a crumpled $100 bill on the table, “breakfast’s on me,” he says, reaching to grasp Gun’s hand goodbye across the table.

“I’ll get it next time, thanks, brother,” Gun says, shaking his hand and winking at Rey as she pulls her jacket on.

Ben leans over the table, tall enough to cover the distance without walking around and kisses Rose squarely on the top of the head.

“Thanks, Rosie,” he says with sincerity, true warmth in his voice.
“Take good care of her, Solo,” Rosie warns.

“I will, I will. Promise.” Ben says, his hand on the back of Rey’s neck as they leave the table and head for the door.

Ben kisses Rey’s temple as they head out the front door, following her through the narrow walkways around tables, finding people still milling around waiting with phones outside, ready to snap photos of Ben, apparently having heard the gossip he was nearby and as they descend the front steps and run down the sidewalk hand in hand, Rey drags him the long way home in a jog all the way to her apartment, flushed and out of breath and almost sweaty by the time they arrive, amped, in love and high as a kite.

*******

Ben sat on Rey’s bed texting while she walked around in a daze, picking up items and putting them back down again, trying hard to imagine what she’d need for her trip to Toronto.

“I don’t know what I need, what do I need? I don’t know what I need,” she murmured, walking in a tight circuit between her dresser and closet and back again.

Ben looked up from his phone.


“I can’t think straight, I can’t wrap my head around this,” Rey said, frustrated she was feeling so flustered and feeling her excitement dwindle as her anxiety ratcheted up.

“Here,” Ben said, putting his phone in his back pocket, standing and taking both her hands in his, “I’ll make this easy. I do this all the time. Listen to me. Passport. Toothbrush. Maybe that one lacy thong from last night, the pink one with the hot little bow on the back and that’s it. Get a jacket, let’s go. Everything else, I’ll buy when we’re there.”

Rey rolled her eyes slightly and rolled her head on her shoulders, “I don’t want everyone thinking I’m a gold digger, you don’t have to buy me stuff. I need to pack.”

“Nobody thinks that,” he said, naively, clearly not having been exposed to the websites Rey had seen the last month, “who cares what the fuck anyone thinks, anyway?”
“They do think that,” she argued, stuffing clean panties, a toothbrush, a long sleeve shirt, pajama pants, a phone charger, headphones, her passport, an extra pair of earrings into her messenger bag, worrying how everything would fit, frustrated she didn’t even own a suitcase, ”plenty of people think that.”

_Should I bring a black trash bag?_ she wondered, trying to imagine herself on a private jet with her movie star boyfriend and a Glad bag of clothes like the former foster youth she was, the image making her brain short circuit with absurdity.

“Rey. Do you have your passport?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, still hurrying while Ben grabbed his beautifully patina-aged leather duffle in one hand, and propped sunglasses on his head, his dark waves held back making him look all of a sudden like a movie star better suited to southern California than eastern Tennessee.

“Then, let’s go,” he said simply, holding out a hand, waiting. “I am your boyfriend. You’re my girl. You’re my Rey, my baby doll, my sweetheart and I will fucking buy you whatever the _fuck_ I want, and nobody will say one goddamn fucking _word_ about it. Now, give me your hand and give me a kiss and let’s get out of here, beautiful.”

Rey dropped her tense shoulders with a grin and bit her bottom lip.

She felt for her bracelet secure on her wrist and made one last grab for the pink lace thong with the bow that sits at the top of her butt and stuffed it inside her messenger bag, too, pulling the whole thing up onto her narrow shoulder, and took Ben’s hand as he led her to the door of her apartment.

He locked it once they were outside, shoved his newly-cut key far down in his jeans pocket as he hiked his duffle into his right hand, pulled his shades over his eyes, laced Rey’s hand in his and pulled her from her apartment, her hand in his, kissing her knuckles before holding her laced hand up against his pecs as they reached the taxi he’d called for.

Rey climbed into the cab, glanced at the purple door of Resistance as they drove past it a moment later and she followed her boyfriend, her beating heart, right off the North Shore.

******

To: Finn
From: Rey
12:25 pm

Need a few days off.
Can you cover?
Will make it up to you!
Promise!!

To: Rey
From: Finn
12:28 pm

Sure, Peanut.
Need a few extra days in
bed with yo man? ;)

To: Finn
From: Rey
12:29 pm

Actually, I am leaving
town with him.
SQUEE!

To: Rey
From: Finn
12:30 pm

OMG!
Lucky girl! You
GO, Peanut!
Where to?
To: Finn
From: Rey
12:31 pm

Toronto

Am texting you from the jet.
The PRIVATE jet, the
first flight OF MY LIFE, Peanut!
May be slightly wigging out.

To: Rey
From: Finn
12:32 pm

Uh, that’s not leaving town,
that’s called
LEAVING THE COUNTRY!
Holy shiitake mushroom,
girl! Uh, yes, I’ll cover!

To: Finn
From: Rey
12:33 pm

Thanks, Finn.
I’m sort of freaking out
first flight
GAHHHHHHHH

To: Rey
From: Finn
12:35 pm
You got this, Reyrey.
Lean on your man.
You got this.

To: Finn
From: Rey
12:36 pm
Thanks, Peanut.
Quality BFF-time
when I get back.

To: Rey
From: Finn
12:37 pm
Yes, actually have
updates to discuss
anyhow.
Have a great trip!
Miss you!
xox

To: Finn
From: Rey
12:38 pm
K! Love you!
THANK YOU!

To: Rey
From: Finn
PS - Poe says make sure Canadian condoms work the same way

To: Finn
From: Rey
*rolls eyes*

turning OFF phone now
xoxo

********

“Baby, here you go,” Ben said to Rey, handing her a small water bottle the flight attendant handed to him, getting Rey’s attention as she peered through the oval window down at the landscape 50,000 feet below the plane.

“Thank you,” Rey replied making eye contact with a smile at June, the attendant in the slacks and crisp shirt, a neckerchief at her neck, a bright smile, heavy eye makeup and a high blonde ponytail swinging as she walked past them professionally.

“This is incredible,” Rey told Ben beside her, making him grin and kiss her temple before she turned to rest her forehead back against the plastic window again, cold and clear beyond her gaze, everything that lay below like a set of children’s toys, a layer of cloudy white cotton obliterating the ground every so often, the world below it muted and serene.

Ben leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes as Rey stared at the world below. Blue, brown, green, everything swirled one moment in a shifting landscape of shades, a taffy-pull of earthen colors, and then segmented boxes of pristinely-cut outlines of distinct spaces the next. Mountains gave way to valleys moved on towards rivers and made way towards towns, each vista Rey’s eyes fell on oblivious to her perch above, looking down from her comfy chair above the clouds.
“I had no idea the world was so big and so small,” she reflected, leaning back as she began to feel dizzy, taking a sip of water inside the cushioned, muffled cabin of the jet she was seated in beside Ben, heading for Canada.

She twisted her head to look at his calm face, eyes closed beside her and she moved his hand from over her shoulders so that it was resting on his knee, laced with her fingers and she stayed quiet, letting herself be carried along, letting the water settle her stomach, letting herself coast.

So, yeah, turns out the world is big, she thought.

So much bigger than I knew, she realized as if for the first time, and maybe it was.

It’s a small world, after all, she remembered the song and wondered how that could be true when she felt so miniaturized, so shrunken suddenly, one small woman in a big, unknown world.

Ben’s eyes had opened and he was looking at her when she put her water bottle down again and she glanced at him, the hushed cabin still except for the mechanical hum, the cold January world outside the plane a silenced pleasure.

“This is dreamy,” she said, reaching beside him to kiss his face, his cheeks and his lips looking lonely, she thought, having not been kissed for at least 30 minutes while he rested.

“Thank you,” she said, feeling light as a breeze, free and easy, and amazed to be winging her way anywhere with him right now.

“Thank you,” he countered, “are you kidding? I went from getting the worst news to being given the best gift possible, baby,” he said, a hand caressing behind her ear.

“I certainly didn’t think when we woke up this morning I would be on an airplane in the sky heading for the first stamp in my passport,” she said, still mystified, shaking her head a little. “This is crazy,” she wrinkled her nose at him.

“I want to do everything with you,” Ben said, “I want to show you everything.”

“I am lucky,” she announced proudly, falling back against her chair, grinning widely and enjoying the freedom, the weightlessness of the moment, all airy clouds and floaty free.

Maybe she would alight herself soon, too, and float around the cabin unencumbered, the moon and the tide and all the water on earth having no gravity over her anymore way up here in the sky.
“How do you have a passport but, no stamps in it?” he asked, bringing Rey’s feet back to earth, her smile flickering gently as she buckled into life again.

“Oh, I needed a passport for I.D.,” she explained. “I never got a driver’s license, I never needed one,” she told him, her eyes finding it easier to focus on the seatbelt stitching on the thick blue, oily folds of fabric of the belt between her fingers than Ben’s face as she told him. “I couldn’t afford a car. I didn’t want to use my Uncle John’s money he left me for that, it would’ve been all gone if I’d used it for a car and then, I’d still have to pay for things like gas and insurance. And I couldn’t drive my foster families’ vehicles. So, then, I just rode a bus for college and decided to get a passport for identification instead of a license that wouldn’t do me any good anyway. And now, I can walk wherever I need to go in the North Shore.”

Ben was studying her as she spoke and it made her nervous.

Was he disgusted with her, seeing how pitiable she was?

How poor?

How pathetic and overlooked?

Did he see her troubled fostered history a permanent mark against her, every family who dismissed her another tally mark, every additional page in her thick manila file a reason she should be overlooked, every additional removal a strike against her?

She thought about her opaque, black Glad trash bag of clothes, her dirty Converse, her lack of a family tree and she looked down and fiddled with the smooth, still unscratched, mirror silver surface of her bracelet, thinking it the only unmarred, perfect thing she owned.

Ben leans over and unbuckles her belt, pulls her onto his lap as she gives a squeak as he kisses her lips, running his hands up into her hair.

“And everyone just watched this treasure walk around town, just saw you go by on your own two little feet, and somehow I managed to be the one you crashed into who finally made you stop walking,” he said quietly, Rey looking up down his eyes as she realized his words were not shaming, not shocked, not really.

Rey smiled down at him from her perch in his lap.

*Speechless*, she thought, *he always leaves me tongue-tied and speechless.*
“I’m getting you a car,” he announced, looking straight ahead, turning from her so she could see him thinking.

“Oh, no you’re not,” Rey said, the blaring headlines *Gold-digger, Down-Home Hussy, Chattahoochie* splashing across her mind’s eye unkindly. “I’ll keep walking. I never even learned how to drive. It’s fine.”

“You just need a teacher,” Ben said, kissing her shoulder, his hands running over her middle, “and I fucking love to drive, I’ll teach you. You’ll love it too, I just gotta get you something as much a sweet, little spitfire as you are,” he decided, reaching to kiss her with a smirk.

Rey rolled her eyes, “I can walk,” she stressed, sensing she was losing a battle and aware this needn’t be something decided today, high above the U.S. border.

“And wait for you to run smack into some other bastard on the street so he falls in love with you when you spill coffee all over him, too? No way, baby doll,” he teased, sitting his chair up straight as the captain announced overhead they were about to land in Toronto, pushing the button on Rey’s chair so it lifted all the way into a straight position as well once she buckled back in.

“Get used to me buying you shit,” he said, their hands laced, his chin jutting towards the window past Rey, motioning for her to look, too.

She turned and watched as they descended, a stream that grew to a widely rushing ribbon of blue, giving way to a quickly-approaching expanse of vibrant city center, towering, windowed sky scrapers and city blocks reaching for miles, water so wide now it looked like an ocean, so blue it could be made of summer mid-day sky and beneath the plane, faster than she knew it was happening, the grey comfort of a road, home to the tires of the plane, as gentle a landing as a robin into a nest, the journey complete and the world made small after all.

******

“Adam Driver,” Ben said to the woman at the concierge desk, checking into the hotel in Toronto. “Checking in.”

Rey glanced up at him and he smiled down at her with a wink.
“Yes, Mr. Driver,” the round-faced brunette behind the desk replied quickly, “your team had already gotten everything arranged, no problem. You’re in Room 2030, one of our suites, 20th floor, the second set of elevators to your left down the hall,” she said, all business, starched and French-accented, so short only her collarbones emerged over the tall counter in front of Rey.

“Thanks,” Ben said, taking the room keys and Rey’s hand.

“Uh, do you need Bell Services, Mr. Driver?” the woman asked, calling out briefly.

“We’re good, thanks,” Ben said, tossing her a smile and leading Rey to the elevators the woman had pointed to.

“‘Adam Driver’?” Rey asked under her breath, stealing a look at Ben as they crossed the glossy tiles of the wide, contemporary lobby flooring.

“I always pick a name like that when I check-in somewhere,” he said, pressing the button for the elevator, looking down at Rey. “Biblical first name, occupational last name. Jacob Shepherd. Noah Hunter. Once I was Luke Walker. This time: Adam Driver.”

Rey smiled to herself and shook her head.

She couldn’t imagine even pretending to be anything other than herself.

“Adam Driver, Kylo Ren…whoever. I know who you really are, Ben Solo,” she said as the elevator lifted them, “and I love you so much.”

The late evening sky outside the windows of the tall building sending a sunset streaming through the glass window doors, Ben’s face slashed across with shadows and brightness, beautiful and kind and unworried and trustworthy, no matter who he was, no matter where they were, looking down at Rey with compassion and generosity, sharing his world with her as if she was worthy of it, as if it was his pleasure to do so.

She pulled herself to her toes and he met her halfway and she kissed him up against the elevator back wall just as much as she could, her hands reaching to thread through the hair at the nape of his neck, her chest pressed to his, his hands firm on her hips, all she needed in the world in her hands right here, right now, no matter what else was true and she stayed there as they ascended, all the way to the top floor.
******

Chapter End Notes

dear reader,
you are my inspiration!

endlessly grateful for you,

xo

Berry
Chapter Summary

moodboard (possibly my favorite?) by the lovely @rileybabe
beta'd helpfully by my wonderful @uselessenglishmajor

True North, Ben's POV drops tomorrow, Friday May 11

Love you, reader!

xo
Berry
“The subject of a rumor

is always the last
to hear it.”

- Stefan Zweig
Knock, knock.

Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock.

Rey hears the pounding on the door but, she is in no hurry to move.

She feels Ben shift beside her in bed, groaning a little as he stumbles towards cognizance, his body showing no signs of leaving the bed where they are tucked in together, Rey finally having drifted off about three hours earlier, never a huge fan of sleeping in new places, a remnant from her foster care childhood.

In fact, early morning door-pounding was never a good sign, either, come to think of it, not for a kid expecting social workers to show up and remove her or for Ben’s girlfriend who only last month was bothered this way in her own home by an angry Hux.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Ben,” she whispers, not sure what the course of action needs to be.

“Go away!” he bellows at the knocking without moving, without opening his eyes, without removing his arms from Rey’s imprisonment beside him.

“Ben,” the voice calls through the slim opening from between the heavy hotel door and its frame, “the car will be leaving in two hours. I’ve been texting you.”

Rey pulls her eyes open completely and looks up at Ben beside her, watches as he rubs his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose hard, reburying his nose in her crown when he’s done. Rey is content to follow his lead on this one and she buries her face back in his chest as he hollers towards the door, “go away, Phas, I won’t be late” the rumble beneath her against her ear and the awareness he is as loathe to move away from their comfy nest of togetherness as she is making her smile against his skin.

“What time is it?” she asked lazily, happy to be reliant, off schedule, on vacation from store ownership, responsibilities, demands beyond the voice at the door yelling for her boyfriend’s presence and she curls a stretch around his body under the layers of soft white sheets and fluffy duvet they share.

“No idea,” Ben says into her hair, his breath hot on her scalp, his hard body under her waking up as
he shifts her in his arms, centering her legs on either side of his thick thigh, “I gave Mal my phone last night and told him I don’t want to fucking hear anything about anything. I’m with my baby,” he said, moving to bring his mouth to her breast, “I am unavailable to anyone else after hours.”

Malaak had come by the room last night as Rey was sitting with her feet in Ben’s lap on the couch in his suite, each getting caught up on texts while waiting on burgers from room service when he arrived and took a chair across from them. Ben held her feet in his lap, not letting her move and hadn’t re-introduced her to Mal again, insinuating they should already be familiar with whom each other were.

“Rey,” Mal ground out with a slightly less formal nod when he took a seat, huffing a huge exhale when he tossed his massive frame into the armchair across from them.

“Hey Malaak,” she’d said, trying to be calm, informal, wondering do I play hostess? am I the hostess in this situation? or not? a guest? wishing she were Rosie who would be welcoming and warm instinctively no matter the scenario or Paige who would crack an irreverent joke and break any tension effortlessly but, Mal and Ben had a couple days’ worth of catching up to do anyhow and she was much more relaxed by the time they finished chatting.

Ben caressed her ankles in his lap and she scrolled through Instagram on her phone, updating Rosie about the hotel, texting Finn a photo of the inside of the jet Ben had brought her to Toronto on and half-listening to the guys’ conversation.

Room service arrived with a knock on the door and Mal left while they were rolling in the linen-covered table-for-two set with china, crystal, tiny salt & pepper shakers and goblets with ice water, warm plates of gourmet burgers topped with crisp vegetables and slices of thick aged cheddar under silver metal canopies, and Rey’s mouth watered so hard she rushed to shout a goodbye to Malaak as he skittered away through the open door, trading places with the food, remembering her manners at the last possible second.

Last night’s dinner had ended with plenty of time for snuggling and it was the first time they’d slept in a bed together without first christening it with sex but, the familiarity of Ben’s body around hers had settled Rey easily, even though the surroundings were foreign - the hotel, the city, the country all a new experience for her - but, she had nothing but peace as he held her and talked with her about the movie, his co-star, and her family, his incredible sense of energy and excitement to start filming, his deep gratitude she had come with him to Canada.

“Thank you, baby doll,” he’d told her in the dark, the navy blue sky depending to dusky January charcoal outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of the suite, “thank you for coming with me. I can’t believe you’d do that for me, Rey, it means the world that you’d trust me like that and come be with me.”
“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be than with you, Ben,” she tells him, curled into his arms like a cinnamon bun, tied tightly into a knot in his arms, facing the illuminated moon shining a curve of bright light into their room, nothing more obvious to her mind in the whole universe than how much she would always choose to be beside him.

“You know, my parents, they never did this kind of thing,” he said, his words floating towards Rey from behind her, over her shoulder towards the moon, floating past her as if he had to speak them, let them go, set them free. “They didn’t come with one another on set.”

“Really?” she asks, genuinely interested and feeling a bit surprised.

“You know, my parents, they never did this kind of thing,” he said, his words floating towards Rey from behind her, over her shoulder towards the moon, floating past her as if he had to speak them, let them go, set them free. “They didn’t come with one another on set.”

“Yeah, well, I mean, I guess they were on location together when they were filming together or whatever but, yeah. They didn’t do life together when they were filming. They took turns staying home, staying behind, staying with me…and even when they weren’t filming, they never could quite decide to do life in the same place at the same time,” he recounted for her, sadness and discernment meeting as he processed it out loud as an adult, able to think about his parents as such - his parents - and also as fellow adults who had navigating celebrity and relationship once upon a time, too.

Rey listened to him, felt his words resound through her back, exit through her chest and meet his sentiments as they met like a flock of birds heading for the window beyond their bed.

“I don’t want that for us, Rey,” Ben said, adamant, firm, squeezing her towards himself ever more tenaciously, curling them tighter into one curved shape, “I don’t want that to be us.”

Rey loosened his grip around herself and turned in his arms, rolled over in bed and looked him in the eye, grateful that being in a bed she had the chance to be eye-level with her tall boyfriend, and she told him with complete assurance, “Ben, that’s not us. We are not your parents.”

He smiled at her slightly, searching her eyes, “that’s why it means so much to me for you to be here. I feel like I can take on the world. Like, I can do my best.”

“Well, ya got me,” she grinned at him. “Literally, that was a one-way ticket and I can’t drive so, I’m stuck here, handsome.”

“Right where I want you,” he’d growled, snuggling into her neck, kissing her and enjoying the
giggles he gathered from her, Rey letting her sweet man roll her around any way he wished, just being present, hoping it all equaled faith for him in what they had, hoping he believed in their love as much as she did.

It was brighter when the sky woke with them to the pounding on the door but, her heart was as deeply content as the night before when she’d fallen asleep before dawn, and when Ben’s tongue enveloped her nipple in the wet heat of his mouth, hearing his groan and feeling his body get harder underneath her just be being used up by him, she melted into him, slid their clothes off hungrily and rode him carelessly, loudly, hair swishing around her shoulders, her hands running over her own skin and his, bouncing hard to bring him as good an orgasm as she could find, getting off on getting him high. She reveled in hearing his black chuckle underneath her before he gasped a climax himself, his hands squeezing her ass so he stilled her right around him where he wanted her, feeling his come pulse into her with a moan of her name from his worshipful, beautiful mouth.

“Fuck, Ben, you’re so hot, I fucking love your cock,” she exclaimed inelegantly, breaking a wave around him, flinging herself onto his chest beneath her when she crested a climax.

"God," she breathed, sitting up, pulling her hair over one shoulder, “you felt so good,” she said, kissing him lazily, catching her breath.

The phone at the bedside rang out shrill and demanding, an unwelcome accompaniment to their respective panting and Rey rolled over towards the bedside table to grab it quickly, dire to silence the sickeningly loud noise while Ben rolled on top of her, covering her body with his own heavily while he caught his own breath.

“Hello?” she asked into the phone a touch more breathless than she’d have preferred.

“Good morning Mrs. Driver, we have a delivery coming up to your suite with bell services promptly,” the concierge informed Rey, her professional voice loud enough to be heard 10 feet away from the phone receiver.

“Oh, it’s not Mrs. Driver,” Rey corrected as Ben overheard and snorted into her neck, crushing her as their heat rates descended.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the voice came, and then conspiratorially but no more quietly, “Mrs. Solo, your delivery is coming up.”
Ben lifted his head from her chest, having heard the voice clearly from his position above Rey in bed and he smirked at Rey who stuttered into the phone, “uh, no…I mean…what delivery?” realizing the best course of action was to just skip it.

“She said my husband bought me something.” she said just trying it out bravely, with her eyes
closed, past his lips and into his open mouth, Ben’s arms tightening around her in a crushing embrace as she did.

“Fuck, I probably should not have enjoyed hearing that as much as I did,” he whispered, kissing her and squeezing tightly.

“Does that get you hot too, baby doll?” he teased, his body tensing above her already. “What if your husband wanted to fuck you again? Right now. Would you tell me yes?”

Rey was enjoying this entirely too much.

Her core throbbed at his voice, his overpowering words flooding her with adrenaline and serotonin.

They needed to get up. Rejoin reality. Get showers. Answer the door when someone knocked with whatever the delivery was.

But oh, God, she felt delirious, that word husband coming out of her mouth, out of his.

“Yeah,” she admitted in a whisper through a smile, her traitorous body arching up into his, her heart far too pleased to imagine herself belonging to Ben forever. She raised her hands to slide her fingers between Ben’s while he kissed her deeply and he pinned them beside her jaw on either side of her pillow, kissing her mouth unrelentingly.

knock, knock, knock.

“Bell services,” the voice outside the door called politely.

“Goddamn, it’s like the whole fucking universe knows we’re up,” Ben complained, rolling off of Rey, pulling pants on and combing his fingers through his hair, “stay put, wife. Don’t move a muscle,” he held up a warning finger at her, one raised eyebrow pinning her to the bed even as he moved further away to answer the door.

Rey smiled to herself and kicked her legs under the sheets in a squeal of joy just to have heard that word from his mouth, wife, and settled back into a normal state of restfulness when Ben walked back in with two overstuffed shopping bags from Anthropologie.

“What are those?” Rey asked.
“Clothes,” he said, pulling his jeans off again. “You needed clothes. I had a production assistant get you some,” he said, climbing back into bed and resuming his previous position.

“How did you know what to buy? Ben… Ben….” Rey bothered him as he snuggled against her, nuzzled her skin again, “you didn’t have to spend so much money… Ben…” she argued, feeling him pull her into his chest as he rolled onto his back.

Rey sat up and looked down at him, telling him again, “hey. You don’t have to spend so much on me.”

“I will not apologize for taking care of you,” he said seriously.

“I don’t want to depend on you to take care of me,” Rey said.

“Uh, I don’t know what to tell you,” he tells her, “I want to take care of you and I’m going to.”

“But, just… you don’t have to,” she insisted, knowing why this was so important to her but, unable to convey it succinctly at the moment.

Ben just leaned up and kissed her nose and rolled his eyes in response.

Rey has no response to this sort of insistent love, this immovable force of concern he has for her.

She thinks about rescue and boats and crumbling roofs and then she remembers where she is and she stops thinking and decides to change tactics.

“Ben, we’ve gotta get up,” Rey said, catching her breath, looking him in the eye, remembering the time.

“Alright, alright,” he said, reluctantly, “go hop in the shower, I’ll be right behind you.”

“No way,” she said, “I know you, Ben Solo, and I know you’re going to come try to have your way in there with me and make us late. It’s day one of filming! Go get ready!”
“Fine,” he said petulantly as he pulled himself to a seated position.

“Good job…and, maybe you can fuck your wife again later,” Rey teased hopefully at the last moment, unable to keep herself from getting the last word, rewarding herself with a huge smile from her man.

“Listen, baby doll, you’d better keep that put away unless you want to get nailed again, holy fuck,” he said teasingly, bending down to threaten her again, “are you the one trying to kill me with sex now?”

“Okay, okay, I give - I give,” she said, slapping him away, knowing time was running out and they needed to get showered and out the door.

“Go on,” she said, shoving him out of bed towards the bathroom, “before Phasma comes and harasses you again.”

“We are revisiting this conversation later,” he said over his shoulder, jumping out of bed with more energy than a man who was as spent as he’d been 10 minutes earlier really should still have.

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She’d never been on one before and arriving on set with Ben was something of a surreal experience at first.

They departed the car that brought them and emerged between rows of trailers, Ben’s closest on the left and his co-star’s on the right, several more beyond that and even further an entire set and backdrop for filming Jane Eyre lay before her, Rey suddenly at the foot of a real-life, behind-the-scenes, movie-making immersive experience, as if she was transported inside a “Making Of…” documentary.

Ben kept his palm on the back of Rey’s neck and guided her through the crowds of people hurrying around, heading for the makeup trailer to get ready to start filming and introduced her around as they walked.

“Hey,” he’d say easily, shaking hands and nodding graciously to people they passed, Rey all smiles and nerves beside him, huddled closely to him with her hands inside the pockets of her brand-new,
eggplant-colored, peplum jacket Ben had the PA buy for her.

“This is my Rey,” he told everyone, who would then shake Rey’s hand, pat her on the shoulder, tell her what an awesome guy her boyfriend was, tell Ben what a lucky guy he was, tell her welcome or offer to help if she needed anything.

It was the easiest job she’d ever had on a Friday morning, really - just walk around, be smiled at, stay close to her Ben and let people comment on how adorable they were together.

*I could get used to this,* she thought, her shoulders easing and her eyes flying to Ben’s face to borrow some of his languid ease from time to time.

As they walked, he whispered names and comments about people they passed, people whose hands they shook into her ear, his nose grazing her temple, his hand never leaving her neck, steering them both.

“He’s a nice guy.”

“He’s a dick, don’t listen to a word he says.”

“She’s Aaron Copeland’s niece.”

“She had four boob jobs and look - still lopsided.”

Rey just smiled up at him and let her hands leave her pockets, swing easily as they weaved through people wearing headsets, name badges swinging from collars, dozens of people, all of whom knew Ben and most of whom weren’t even bothering them, focused and industrious as if a nuclear warhead launch was imminent.

“Baby,” Ben said, pulling them to a halt before a man around Ben’s height, ruddy hair and a backward baseball cap on his head, “this is Bryan, part of the crew. Good pal of mine, worked with me on the last three Ren films. I want you to meet my girl, Bryan,” he introduced them, “this is Rey.”

“Aw, hey, really nice to finally meet you,” the man said kindly. “Heard lots about you. Our boy here is sure crazy about you.”

He looked like every other normal, blue-collar man Rey had ever met in her life and she immediately liked him, feeling the warmth bubble between him and Ben.
If Ben trusted him, she would, too.

“Hey, beers tonight after we’re done,” Bryan said to Ben after Rey shook his hand, “both of you should join us. Or…wait, you’re not drinking, that’s right. Just come out with us and we’ll find you a fuckin water or something man, alright?” he teased Ben with a punch on his deltoid.

“We’ll see, smart ass,” Ben punched him back, “thanks.”

Rey slipped her arm around Ben’s waist as they began walking again, proud of him for being brave enough to fight not only her dragons beside her but his own, too, feeling she was in love with something of a champion, not just a man, proud of him beyond belief as she walked around set with him.

As they reached the trailer, a short, balding man with a headset perched around his neck approached Ben with a far more authoritative air than most men his stature normally carried and he spoke to Ben in the unmistakable tone of someone who was large and most assuredly in charge.

“Ben,” he said, slamming a hand on Ben’s shoulder, “ready to get to work? Let me see your pupils…” he said, leaning up and eyeing Ben closely, presumably looking to gauge whether he was sober.

“Sure thing,” Ben said with a smile, "yes, Donnie. Sober.”

“Well, just stay on the straight and narrow til we get this wrapped, will you, kid?” he intoned harshly, moving to leave before Ben stopped him.

Gesturing to Rey, Ben said, “Hey, uh, Donnie, this is my Rey,” he introduced the two.

“Right, right,” the director said, shaking Rey’s hand aggressively, moving her arm up through its socket with his pumping motion. “We’ll have a chair and a headset in the tent if she wants to watch,” he told Ben, mouth set in a strict line, moving on and shouting over his shoulder, “shooting as soon as you’re done.”

“That was the director,” Ben told Rey, looking down at her, clearly amused.
“Apparently,” she said, teasing him back, a twinkle in her eye.

She accompanied Ben into makeup, watching him get more applied than she had ever worn in her entire life and she met Lydianna and Dory, the artists responsible for turning Ben’s face into Edward Rochester’s, styling his hair and features into a Brontë-written, Byronic hero, a perfect Victorian-era gentleman, and she found they were, as Ben had promised, delightful women.

“Hold still,” Dory told Ben at least 14 times as he moved his mouth in that adorable way of his, talking around Dory’s adept hands moving to prep his face in his attempts to tell Rey things.

“She’ll still be there when you’re done, Solo, God,” she chided him with mock exasperation.

“Go, go,” she shooed him out of the chair and pulled the tissue from his collar as soon as she was finished, readying her supplies for the next actor.

“It’s like he’s an excited puppy,” Dory winked at Rey as Rey stood to leave with Ben. Ben leaned over and kissed Dory’s cheek, the older, plump woman tsking him as he took Rey’s hand and headed for the door.

Leaving the makeup trailer and heading for wardrobe, Rey stepped down to the ground and recognized the woman opposite her immediately.

Charlotte D’Agostino, Ben’s co-star, Ms. Jane Eyre herself, established Hollywood indie star stood holding a baby girl, fully made-up except lipstick, hair styled into complex buns and braids but, wearing an oversized button-down shirt under a North Face puffy coat atop a pair of grey sweatpants and running shoes.

“Hey, Charlotte, good to see you,” Ben said, approaching the woman holding the noisy, chubby child in her arms, “who’s this?”

“This,” said the clearly overwhelmed woman, “is Sophia, and she is ready for a nap,” she told them, wrangling the baby’s limbs with limited success.

A man approached from behind her and immediately relieved the jumble of writhing baby from Charlotte, introducing himself to Ben and Rey while coralling the girl easily.

“Hi, Michael Stone,” he introduced himself, “Charlotte’s husband, Sophia’s dad,” he added.

Ben introduced himself, Rey shook both hands and did the same and she and Ben walked away after a minute to leave the small family of three to figure things out for themselves there, standing
between the trailer doors, overhearing them discuss nap time, lunch, shooting and set logistics as they walked away.

A baby on set, Rey made a mental note. Got to watch and see how that works.

Ben deposited Rey in a director’s style chair, her back propped against the taut twill fabric and her feet tucked onto the wooden bar at ankle-height, and he handed her a set of headphones to listen to dialogue as they filmed.

“You be okay here?” he asked. “You okay to sit and watch?”

“Snug as a bug in a rug,” she said, settling into her chair happily, content to blur into the background of the hubbub around them, the bustling of the crew and cast a buzzing whirlwind of tasks and business, a hive of activity ready to churn out something amazing.

“You sure?” he asked again, “because I can have them move your chair or…”

“Ben,” Rey stressed, pulling his lapels and kissing his plush lips, “go to work.”

He winked at her and told her “love you,” and took off, running his hand through his hair with one hand as he strode away confidently, his long legs carrying him to his mark and his elegant posture straightening into something vintage as he moved almost as if he were stepping through a time warp before her eyes, transforming into a character and someone she didn’t know as soon as he stood opposite Charlotte and the cameras rolled and Donnie the director yelled “action.”

Rey watched studiously.

The goings-on behind-camera were completely fascinating, the actions on set infinitesimal, almost impossible to see with the naked eye, and Rey was amazed at the art with which she watched Charlotte and Ben move through the scene.

They were shooting a conflict-laden, heartfelt, dialogue-heavy scene first thing and Rey was entranced by the patience with which everyone repeated their actions over and over, each time they cut and re-rolled through material they had just completed, shifting a limb, a word, an expression just the slightest degree to get a better outcome.

It was mesmerizing.
When she pulled the headset off to give her ears and brain a break after a couple hours, seeing the actors move into a huddle with the director and his staff, she shook her ponytail gently and rearranged her legs underneath herself and pulled out her phone to see what texts she had missed while she was wholly distracted watching filming.

She got up and meandered, stretching her legs and finally stopped to lean against a railing while texting Finn about filming.

He would love this, Rey knew.

“She’s sort of a skinny bitch, isn’t she?”

“I mean, they always are, the ones they bang up and marry,” a buxom redhead said, her hand on her hip, her back to Rey. “But they fuck women with tits and ass like me, I’ll tell you that much.”

“What, you don’t think he’s fucking her?” the first woman asked.

“Oh, I’ll bet he is,” the redhead said, looking straight in Ben's direction and giving a shake of her head and an appreciative bite of her lower lip, “I’ll bet a man like that is one hell of a good lay. He probably knows just how to get the job done. Yeah, he fucks her up good, alright.”

“Well, he could do whatever he wanted to me, that’s for damn sure,” the first woman said, “look at his hands. God, they’re so big, imagine how big his cock is. I’d let him defile me six ways to Sunday and thank him after.”

Rey had a sinking feeling in her gut swirl like a vat of molten lava, and as she eavesdropped she knew exactly what was happening, exactly who was being discussed and she stood frozen as she listened.

“Hell yes,” the redhead agreed. “Fuck it, he can shuck up with any skinny, little bitch he wants, I’m still gonna suck his cock.”

“Really?” the first woman said, “even while the girlfriend is around?”

“Never met a man who didn’t like his cum swallowed, Maggie, and that gorgeous man right there is no different, bet me any fucking amount of money,” the redhead said.

Rey felt her cheeks heat to dangerous levels and the anger in her belly rose to a tide of fury up her throat.

“Here comes Phasma,” Maggie said to the redhead and Rey ducked her head behind the column beside her fully to hide herself.
“Maggie,” Phasma greeted her, “Cynthia.”

“Hey Phas,” the redhead greeted her, “whaddya know about Daddy Solo’s little whatsherface he brought up here?”

“God,” Phasma rolled her eyes, “that little tart? Nothing important, I’ll tell you that much,” she said, sounding bored.

“They serious?” Maggie asked Phasma.

“Are you kidding me?” Plasma said with a puff of a laugh to the two women, “literally, she’s about 15 years old, she’s poor as dirt, she’s from some backwater shit town part of fucking Tennessee and she weights about 100 lbs soaking wet. Yeah, no, I’d say not serious about much except keeping his dick wet,” Phasma snorted. “Between you and me, he was fucking her when he was still with Jennifer Allison, you know, before they broke up so you can imagine how much longevity that relationship has going for it,” she finished conspiratorially.

Rey felt her body overheating as if she were locked in a sauna.

Her body went up in a vapor of steam head to toe, her head started to cloud and her eyes blurred, and she turned to escape the clouds of venom that encased her in such proximity to the viperous women as quickly as her weak legs would carry her, straight back into the chair she’d vacated.

Steadying herself as best she could, she put her phone back into her purse and touched her trembling fingertips to her burning cheeks, still unaware of anyone else around her until she felt a presence beside her and jumped when she heard her name.

“Hey, Rey,” Malaak said from beside her, “want something to eat?”

Mal stood beside her and Rey’s eyes welled with tears as she nodded and hopped down off the chair, following him to the snack table far from set, on the other side of the tent.

He watched her as he handed her a bottle of water and she chugged the entire thing voraciously, slim trails of tears running down her cheeks as she leaned her head back to drink all the cleansing water down, trying to cool off inside and out as fast as possible, clean her ears and brain and thoughts and mind from the poison the three women in the tent had spewed.

“Uh…” Mal stuttered, “you…okay?” He was clearly not equipped and not prepared for comforting Ben’s girlfriend.

That wasn’t his job and Rey no more wanted him to attempt it than he did.

Wiping away tears assertively she assured him with a wide smile, “oh yes! Just…so good. The movie is so good,” she told him, aware he most likely was not buying her excuse of emotion at the
Mal furrowed his brow, clearly not believing her and motioned with his head over his shoulder.

“Ben’ll be done in a while. Why don’t you head into his trailer. I think he’d like you to put your feet up,” he suggested. “Come on, I’ll take you,” he added, seeing Rey’s uncertainty at his offer.

Too sad, too shocked, too helpless to do more than obey, Rey followed Mal to Ben’s trailer and climbed the three small steps inside as Mal held the door open for her, telling her from outside, “just take a load off. Nobody comes in unless I say so, don’t worry,” he said, probably seeing the ordeal written clearly on her face, unsure whether she should be doing this. “Really,” he nodded. “Ben will be by in a bit.”

Rey nodded and said thanks and lowered herself onto the stiffly upholstered built-in couch of the trailer as soon as the door closed.

She was alone, stunned distress on her face and an inability to comprehend all that she’d overheard falling around her like fog, her fight-or-flight mechanism dialing down into a weariness that blanketed her like a tangible weight and as she curled herself into a tight ball on the sofa, Rey squeezed her hands into fists, her eyes closed and she focused on her breathing diligently until she fell asleep.

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“Hey,” Ben soothed into her ear, kneeling beside her on the floor, still in costume as Rey’s eyes opened. “There’s my girl,” he said with a quiet smile and a kiss on Rey’s forehead as she smiled and woke.

She sat up with a start, her jacket still zipped up and purse still slung around herself, too warm where she’d fallen asleep in this trailer and Ben dressed in a suit with a cravat at his neck, his long dark waves falling over the white collar like a vintage god of literature, all of it feeling like she was still in a dream and leaving her disoriented.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she stuttered, heart pounding, jumping up from the couch, “I didn’t mean to fall asleep, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry. Baby doll, it’s fine, I just wanted to see you,” Ben said, all smiles and calm, bright energy, his mood buoyant and his body radiating heat and excitement. “You having fun?” he asked expectantly.
“Mhmm,” Rey said, climbing into his lap on the couch where he’d sat, tugging off her jacket and dropping it next to his on the chair beside them, curling into him to soak up his mood, his comfort, his aura while she could, knowing full well it was what she needed.

“Not too boring?” Ben asked, kissing her hair, holding her close.

The overheard conversation flooded Rey again, all the accusations and nasty insinuations the three women had shared accosted her again like arrows but she burrowed her head into Ben’s chest and closed her eyes, breathing in deeply.

_He smells the same_, she realized with a breath of relief. _He’s my Ben. Mine._

“Not too boring,” she repeated back to him with a smile, meeting his eyes, “and you are amazing, Ben, really,” she told him. “A wonder.”

Ben gave a shake of his head and bit his lip, “it feels good,” he said. “It feels really good, baby. I love having you here,” he told her, leaning in to kiss her.

Rey willed herself to give over to the kiss, let herself be _herself_ with him but, her heart was still caught up in the pain of what she’d eavesdropped on and she didn’t want to unload that on Ben mid-day.

“Hey,” Ben said, pulling back, looking at her eyes, “I know the guys are heading out tonight but, I want time with you alone, still. That alright? I haven’t had my fill yet.”

“Yes, please,” she said, feeling better, “I would love another night alone together.”

“Alright, _Mrs. Driver_, well,” he said, standing and pulling Rey to do the same, kissing her cheeks and nose between words, “go back to the hotel whenever you want, Mal will take you,” he said. “And I’ll be home in time for dinner. Won’t be a late shoot. We’ll find something to eat and get in bed and turn our phones off.”

“That sounds good,” Rey smiled up at him, appreciating the sounds of him calling her _Mrs._, coming _home to her_ and sharing a meal, the domestic pleasure of it an intoxicating boon to Rey’s
heart after sustaining such a painful blow earlier.

He kissed her once more and reapplied his jacket, then opened the door and Rey heard Ben tell Mal to take her to the hotel whenever she wanted, he’d be back later, and then he was gone.

Rey sat down on the edge of the couch and listened to the muted shouts of the crew and cast outside the trailer, feeling more a tag-along, standout, leftover nuisance of a drag than she possibly ever had in her entire life and she let out a huge sigh.

This was maybe going to be harder than she thought.

*************

Rey spent the balance of the day, after watching Ben and Charlotte shoot one more scene for a couple hours early afternoon and kissing him goodbye quickly afterward, lounging around the hotel suite alone. She put her feet up, watched HBO, sat and stared out the ginormous picture windows at downtown Toronto as the afternoon faded to evening and laid staring at the ceiling as the room darkened around her in a soft nest of anonymous, white, starched-linen feather pillows.

She thought about texting her friends, sending updates and photos and telling them about her day on location with her handsome, movie star boyfriend but, she couldn’t bear to tell them the truth was she was hiding in a hotel room, licking her wounds and feeling forlorn.

Every overheard word those three women had said tumbled through her mind, their venomous gossip a torrent of lies breaking like shallow waves over rocks of truth she stood on in a stream of arguments, but it was relentless and it was tiring dismantling and withstanding them each as they assaulted her.

Other women want him.

Other women will throw themselves at him.

Other women will hate her.

They’ll try to unseat her, compete with her, and disparage her at any point.

She’ll have women who hate her.

And Ben? Handsome, faithful, desirable, Ben?
Ben will potentially be under tremendous pressure to cheat, a wholly enticing challenge to a whore like Cynthia.

Phasma is a hateful bitch.

There’s a rumor she’s spreading Rey is a home wrecker who came between Ben and Jennifer Allison.

And today, Rey had spent more time then she would have preferred ALONE.

One light was illuminated in the room on the table beside the bed where she lay when Rey heard the door unlatch and light poured under the bedroom door, Ben’s voice coming from the hallway.

“Thanks, man,” Ben was saying into the phone. “Have a good night. Yeah, you too.”

He appeared in the doorway as Rey climbed off the bed and walked towards him, jumping up into his arms as he threw his phone on the bed.

“Hey,” she said, attacking him with kisses as she wound herself around him. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” Ben groaned into her neck, kissing her soundly, “got here as soon as I could,” he told her. “Later than I thought. I’m sorry.”

“S’okay,” Rey assured him, “you’re here now.”

“I’m here now and so are you,” he told her as he sat them down on the bed, holding her close. “which makes my life better than ever. You have a good day?”

“Mhmm,” she murmured noncommittally, “did you?”

“It was fucking amazing,” he breathed. “I haven’t felt that good filming in a long time. Everything just clicked, ya know? And Charlotte’s great, don’t you think Charlotte’s great? Such a good scene partner.” He was bubbling with remnants of adrenaline, vibrating with a thrill of a job well done and the happiness of accomplishment thrumming all around him. “It was so awesome you were there with me, Rey. I swear to God, baby doll, you’re like traveling with my own personal energy drink on tap. Knowing you’re there? On set? In the trailer? And I can just see you whenever I’m
able? It was amazing. I feel like I could run a marathon right now!”

Rey smiled at him and laid down, his effervescence exhausting her by proximity, draining her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with a concerned look. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, I…” Rey trailed off, unsure how to tell him about what her day felt like, whether she should. “I was just lonely, I think. For you. For my life. It was wonderful, don’t get me wrong! It was wonderful…well, mostly wonderful…” she says, remembering the women, the words she overheard, tempering her words with an ounce of truth but, going on so as not to confuse him, “but, there’s really not much for me to do to be useful here. Or like, at least not be in the way.”

“Oh,” Ben said, his face falling slightly, “well, maybe we need to do something different,” he said. “What do you want to do?”

“I dunno…” Rey said, “what does Charlotte’s husband do all day while you’re shooting?”

“I think he’s a day trader. He works in the trailer, I’m pretty sure,” Ben said, “and he takes care of their baby.”

“Hmm,” Rey thought out loud, “well, that’s no help, then. Besides, I do want to see you work. I loved seeing you work. You’re incredible. I wanted to jump you in that suit and tie, you looked so fucking hot,” she said with a grin, admitting her own kink out loud.

“Oh yeah?” Ben smiled back. “You did, did you? You’d rather watch me work than let me put a baby in you? Is that what you’re saying, Mrs. Driver?” he asked, pulling her closer and tugging at her clothes, running hands over her skin and crawling backward on the bed under them.

“That’s not my name,” Rey corrected him, crawling above him, pulling off layers as she reached down and kissed him punishingly, biting his bottom lip between her teeth.

“Is that what you’re saying, Mrs. Solo?” he repeated darkly, his voice even lower, his hands sharply driving her hips over his center as she leaned her naked torso over his bare chest and kissed him hard.
“That’s right,” she affirmed, feeling empowered and helplessly turned-on, “now, take off the pants.”

“Say husband,” he told her, unbuttoning and yanking her jeans off.

“Husband, lose the pants and take me,” she whispered directly into his ear, leaning in closely, happy to know his kink and use it freely, satisfied as she heard his groan against her mouth she was his and he was hers and those bitter women could go fuck themselves.

This wasn’t her native country, her familiar surroundings or her normal routine but Rey knew they had another thing coming if anyone thought this was anything other than permanent, what she and Ben shared.

Maybe this was all new and she was fresh meat and this whole thing uncharted territory but Rey wasn’t confused.

Ben was her home and she was his.

Anywhere he was, she belonged.

They couldn’t take that away from her.

She repeated that to herself as she fell asleep in the Toronto hotel room that night in Ben’s arms, willing herself to believe it more fully, wear it like a shield, wield it like a sword.

They belonged to each other and that was final.

All she had to do was repeat that to herself ad infinitum all day long tomorrow and then every time she doubted whether they could indeed take that away from her from now until forever.

Easy.
who made this sweet moodboard? Why, the constant rileybabe, naturally. And who beta'd this beast? Why, the faithful uselessenglishmajor, of course.

NEW True North Chapter 8 tomorrow, Tuesday, May 15
see you there

xo
Berry
“What is love except another name for…

positive reinforcement?”

- B F Skinner

Maybe if they were at her place, Rey would try to keep it down but, they’re in a hotel under a false
name anyhow.

Fuck it, she thinks, as she hears herself let out a rip-roaringly noisy groan.

“Ben, oh my God,” she pants, spreading her legs as widely as she can, feeling his hands pull her calf up and bend her knee against his chest so he can change the angle for them where he’s been fucking her since they woke.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says, unable to reach her mouth for a kiss, settling for pounding into her hard, hips meeting hers with every thrust, their eyes locked as they chase pleasure together, just over the hill, just out of reach. “I can’t believe you’re here with me. I can’t believe I get to be the one who gives it to you like this.”

“Nobody but you, never, nobody but you,” she chants, nearly delirious but meaning it more than she’s ever meant anything else.

Ben pulls from her body and motions for her to sit up and they both take a breather as they change positions, kissing one another when they meet on their knees in the center of the bed, arms tight around each other.

“What do you need,” she asks him, “I want to give you anything you need, Ben, I want you so fucking badly.”

“I just need to know that,” he says, “you’re all I need, baby, your sweet, little pussy is all I need.”

Rey grins victoriously and moves off the bed, leaning over and arching her back like a cat while she lifts her butt into the air, Ben following and moving into position behind her and grabbing her by the hips, biting her ass cheeks and sliding himself along her messy center torturously.

“Is this how you want it?” she teases him, “Hmm?”

Ben grunts as he enters her and reaches to wrap his arms around her, “I want to be so close to you, baby doll, I want you to take it all from your man and let me fill you up good.”

Rey smiles and kisses his chin over her shoulder, “give it all to me.”
“You want your husband to fuck you, baby?” he whispers into her ear, Rey’s eyes closed and his fingers pinching her nipple in a gentle twist as he rams into her hard from behind, making Rey finish with a scream, his every word like living a dream, his every touch impossibly like heaven.

“That’s right,” he says, “that’s fuckin right,” his final words as he climaxes, too, emptying himself deep inside Rey bringing them both incredible satisfaction and elation.

“Good God,” he exhales, pulling himself onto the bed, catching his breath where he lay on his back, arms thrown wide and Rey crawling up to lay beside him, lacing fingers together, side-by-side, staring at the ceiling together as they recover.

Everything about the husband and wife kink feels right to Rey.

Too right, she realizes as reality descends like a light mist falling from the hotel room ceiling.

She loves this man more than she ever thought possible, her heart irretrievably in his keeping, period. Paragraph. She belongs to him, body and soul whether she bids her heart differently or not, she’s been at this thing long enough to know it’s a done deal for her.

She’ll never love anyone like she loves Ben, he’s ruined and claimed her forever.

However, they’re in Toronto right now, not Tennessee or California either, for that matter, and the reality of the situation is they don’t live near one another.

It goes beyond the fact they are separated by status and occupation, even beyond the fact they love each other.

They haven’t aligned their lives yet in one particularly, spectacularly important way, namely where they live and being on this trip away from their respective homes is offering them a chance to play out a marriage fantasy but, Rey realizes as her smile fades from her face, she isn’t, in fact married to Ben, she doesn’t live with him even if they aren’t married and she has to return to the facts.

The fact is, she lives on the North Shore of Chattanooga and her boyfriend lives a full 5-hour flight away.
“Hey so, are you okay to join some of the guys for dinner tonight after the shoot?” Ben asks with a widely hopeful grin, turning on his side to face her happily, his mind clearly not caught in a building thunderstorm of concerns anything like Rey’s.

“Oh, um, sure,” Rey says, knowing she’s lost in her own head and this isn’t the time for that. “Sounds good,” she says, reaching to peck his lips. “I’m gonna jump in the shower,” she tells him as she leaves the bed.

“Hey,” he calls, still laying on the bed, grinning his smug signature smirk from on his back again, all naked and proud man of him, his hands moving behind his head lazily, “I love you.”

“I love you back,” she says with a grin as she heads for the bathroom, tucking her thoughts away for consideration later.

Today needs to be better than yesterday.

It needs to.

*********************

“Hi,” Charlotte says as she comes to stand beside Rey’s chair, where she’s already been deposited while Ben goes to wardrobe to prepare for shooting today.

Charlotte is already completely outfitted besides the fuzzy slippers on her feet which look at odds with the pale brown, modest, Regency-era, long-sleeved gown with high lace neckline and wrist-length sleeves below her smooth bun and twisted strawberry blonde double braids.

“Oh, hey!” Rey greeted her, happy to see someone who at least seemed like a friend, even if she was more Ben’s friend than her own.

“Hard sitting for so long, huh?” Charlotte asked, “that’s what Michael always tells me when he watches a shoot. He always gets up and paces. And he doesn’t smile when I’m working, he’s focused so hard when he watches me, so he just stands there, like this,” she crosses her arms over her chest in a crushing “X” and widens her stance and furrows her brow deeply while pursing her lips feverishly, “so people always think he’s pissed.”
She drops her arms and smirks at Rey.

“People are forever asking me ‘why’s your husband so angry all the time?’ ” she says with a snort.

Rey grins and decides she probably likes Charlotte, Michael and their baby.

“Little do they know, I’ve got him wrapped around my little finger,” she says with a conspiratorial wink.

“He seems like a good guy,” Rey says with a giggle, “and your baby is so adorable.”

“Come visit at 2 am when she’s mad I won’t nurse her back to sleep, tell me she’s adorable then,” Charlotte says.

Rey bristles as she sees the two gossiping terrors from yesterday approach Charlotte, although they don’t even seem to see her sitting beside the actress.

“Hey Charlotte,” they each croon, “how are you, sweetie? You were so good yesterday. Ohmygod like, so good.” they speak in tandem as if a two-headed being, so Rey can’t decipher who said which words exactly, not that it matters. They’re clearly sucking up to Charlotte and it’s so blatant she’d be embarrassed for them if they weren’t both so shameless.

“Aw,” Charlotte says, her head cocking hard to one side, walking the thin line only a woman can toe, right between condescension and authenticity as she says, “thanks, you guys,” a small, tight smile on her face, held just so until they disappear and Charlotte turns and rolls her eyes at Rey.

“Cows,” she murmurs venomously.

Yeah, I like her, Rey thinks.

“Hey, so, sorry I gotta kiss your man today,” Charlotte tells her apologetically. “Always sort of weird for some people. Just remember, Ben’s like kissing a little brother for me. Don’t worry. Okay? I promise, he’s a great guy and all but, he is not my type. Plus, my husband is riitiight over there in that trailer with my one-year-old. Okay?”
Rey smiles at her, aware how generous and gracious and kindheartedly thoughtful this is, realizing this is why Charlotte came over here, why she’s name-dropping her husband in the conversation so much, why she’s being so nice. It gives her all sorts of thankful and anxious feelings simultaneously.

“Thanks,” she says, with a real smile, reaching out to squeeze Charlotte’s arm where it’s resting on her chair. “I appreciate it.”

“Yeah well, we were all new to this once upon a time,” Charlotte says with a wistful sigh, “even if some of us are almost too ancient for this business now.”

She pats Rey’s arm and walks away, kicking off her slippers and pulling on her lace-up boots with the help of a production assistant who talks into her headset and balances a clipboard on her thigh, all the while kneeling to help Charlotte complete dressing.

Rey puts her headphones on and leaves them in place when Ben walks up and puts his hand on the back of her chair and leans in to kiss her briefly, leaving her with a wink as he strides to his mark, one hand through his hair as always, smiling at her over his shoulder before slipping the mask of Edward Rochester over his own face imperceptibly.

She concentrates as she watches the scene they’re shooting today unfold, Mr. Rochester begging Jane to leave with him, even once she knows he has a crazy wife locked in the attic, offering to live a life of sin with her or if she prefers, a life of polite friendship, neither of which Jane wants to face or accept.

Rey feels tears drip off her cheeks as she holds her breath and watches as Ben begs Charlotte to stay at Thornfield Hall, propriety be damned, or else flee to Italy with him, feeling Jane Eyre’s rejection amplified against Rochester’s increasingly desperate pleas.

“I saw this magical thing…you were in my path…do you remember?” Ben asks Charlotte, moving closer, his hand on her jaw, tilting her head so she looks up into his eyes. “And since that moment I’ve never wanted to leave the place that you were. If you left I would be waiting for my little bird to return.”

They move closer to one another, Ben’s voice deeper and rumbling, replacing his actual voice with the commanding, broken tone of a brokenhearted bridegroom.

“We have to be together,” he insists to Jane Eyre, “say that you don’t love me. I dare you.” He kisses Charlotte on the cheeks and the lips, still awaiting an answer.
“You cannot,” he decides, certain but not smug, trembling but unafraid.

“I will not. I will love you until I die,” Charlotte’s voice breaks into Rey’s ears through the headphones, clear as a bell and heartwrenching, her eyes lifted to Ben’s, her face dwarfed in his hands.

“And yet you will leave me,” Ben says, staring down at her, caressing her face in his hands while shaking his head sadly, “you mean to go your way and for me to go mine.”

“Yes, sir,” Charlotte responds surely, her voice unwavering and tears in her eyes.

“‘Sir’, again,” Ben says, resigned bitterly, moving further away from Charlotte and dropping one hand, “not Edward.”

“I must leave Thornfield, Mr. Rochester,” Charlotte tells Ben, removing his other hands from her face before Donnie the director yells, “aaaand, cut!”

Within a heartbeat, Ben and Charlotte are 6 feet apart from one another, facing Donnie instead of one another, as he approaches them with notes and instruction.

Several makeup artists and crew members shuffle into the space, rearranging hair and props for another take, and Rey shakes her head a little to free herself from the emotional scene that’s captivated her so utterly as she’s watched.

It’s surreal.

It’s not bad, per se, watching Ben and a leading lady profess their love to one another, she decides, although it’s likely a bit easier to accept a scene of him being rejected by another woman as opposed to him being welcomed by one but, whatever. This was fun and Rey was right, Ben is fucking enthralling in this role. It’s sure to be a smash.

Rey wants to peel his clothes off him and kiss away his tears and mess up his styled wavy hair and hear him say her name, too so, she’ll sympathize to some degree if countless women who see this film feel likewise.

At any rate, she’s the one who gets him naked in real life and that’s what matters, she smiles.
She blinks to her left and sees Cynthia and Maggie, the women whose conversation she overheard the day before, standing idly by, waiting in the wings to go on, and she walks past them, not sparing them any attention whatsoever, nose barely in the air, ignoring their voices when she hears one of them greet her, “oh, hey,” to get her attention and she just keeps walking, her heart pounding hard in her chest.

*Bite me,* she thinks, and keeps walking.

************

Four hours later, Rey is on her knees in Ben’s trailer, giving him the blowjob of his life.

Or, at least that’s what he says when she’s finished, as he tries to rearrange his suit into something befitting a Victorian-era gentleman.

“Fuck, baby,” he sighs, his head against the back of the couch, “I think it’s official. This is the best filming experience of my life, Rey, I swear to God. You are going to make it impossible for me to ever go back to filming without you around to suck me off at lunchtime.”

Rey rolls her eyes and climbs onto the couch beside him.

“Oh, you’ll survive,” she says as he lays his head in her lap and stares up at her.

“God, I love you,” he says, looking up at her as she slides her fingers through his hair.

“Mmm,” she hums at him with a smile, “is that you talking, or the blowjob?”

“Me,” he affirms, “the blowjob would ask you to schedule a repeat.”

“Well, I don’t know, how long will filming last? You know I like the suit.”
“Well, I don’t know, how long will you stick around?” he asks, pulling her face close to kiss her.

Everything in Rey’s heart wants to say forever, Mr. Solo, I’ll stay with you forever super dramatically, and whether it’s the melodramatic scenes she’s watched today and her reluctance to imitate Jane Eyre, to have her heart broken by being dragged away from Ben and be responsible against her will or just the actual truth in her heart she isn’t sure but, it’s not the time or the place and that wasn’t what he meant and she actually does have to go back to the North Shore pretty soon.

They’re granted another half hour of cuddling before Ben is needed back on set and Rey decides to take a break from watching, meandering over to Michael and Charlotte’s trailer to hang out with him and their baby for a little while and share coffee while little Sophia cruises around the living room and watches Daniel Tiger on her father’s iPad.

Rey plays with Sophia on the floor, her pale red curls ringing her chubby baby face, a tiny version of her mother, and she watches with wonder as the small, determined little girl makes her way into her commanding dad’s lap while he barks into his phone about stocks and trading, the scowl Charlotte mentioned set in his mature, salt and pepper hair and beard at odds with how tenderly he cradles his daughter absently as he finishes his phone call.

As they chat, Rey is comforted to learn how naturally Michael knows how to deal with Charlotte’s star status, married 8 years and parenting together for more than a year already, and that he’s down-to-earth, unaffected by the fact his wife is on the other end of the grounds, potentially making out respectfully with Rey’s boyfriend.

“Love scenes are about as real as a horror flick,” he says, stoically. “You seen one of those filmed yet?”

Rey shakes her head.

“Basically all ketchup,” Michael tells her, “the whole thing’s about as real as a three dollar bill.”

Rey smiles.

She can handle all of this if she’s got people like Charlotte and Michael to help her make sense of it, she realizes, and when she goes back to the set to watch the scene Ben is shooting, one in which he is yelling and screaming and having a tantrum, she feels herself think about three dollar bills
and ketchup and how she’s never seen him blow a gasket like that in real life, how it doesn’t even seem like Ben himself throwing that fit, and when the director ends the scene she sees Ben turn off the emotion like the twist of a knob and his face settles into the man she loves again, sweet and cocky and good.

*He’s so talented,* she thinks.

*Just amazing,* she thinks, observing him in his suit, tall and broad and ogle-worthy and probably smelling fucking delicious.

*Someone so impressive and beautiful and incredible,* Rey thinks.

Someone who deserves another blowjob.

From her.

************

Rey walks into the downtown sports bar she and Ben arrive at to meet several members of the crew around 7 pm and she would be absolutely shivering if it weren’t for the layers Ben has bought her she’s currently wrapped up in, far more lovely and likely about three times more expensive than anything she’s bought at a Walmart, a Goodwill or a Target in the last couple winters at home.

She shivers in the January chill a little as Ben leads her by the hand to a long, high-top table at the back where Bryan, the crew member Rey met yesterday and Malaak are already seated with several other guys from the crew, Rey being the only woman present and immediately slightly embarrassed at how they fawn over and wait on her as soon as she’s in their presence, deferring their seats to her if she wants them, smacking one another to *shut the fuck up, there’s a lady present,* and telling her if she ever gets tired of dating a human tree, let them each know.

Rey smiles good-naturedly and puts her arm around her boyfriend’s broad shoulders in a nearly-humorous way and tells him, “*ya hear that, Solo? Gotta treat me right,*” inspiring a hearty round of cajoling and teasing between him and the guys at the table, offering Rey a break from being the center of attention while she looks at the menu and relaxes beside Ben, his hand on her knee as he goofs off with the guys present.

Rey’s eye is caught by a woman’s approach, and she looks up believing it to be a waitress when she realizes instead with a jolt it is someone heading directly for her, someone she recognizes and her heart leaps into her throat when she realizes it’s Paige, marching into the Toronto restaurant as
if she owns the joint, a rolling suitcase behind her, her ankle-length, wool coat fluttering around her like a maroon cape, her black hair swishing in her ponytail behind her, her eyes alight with mirth as always, stomping the linoleum like she’s a fierce supermodel owning a runway in Milan.

Paige? she thinks.
Paige! she confirms.

“Paige!” Rey squeals, jumping up and throwing her arms around her friend’s neck in a lung-constricting squeeze, “oh my God!! What are you doing here? How did you get here?”

“Benny,” Paige greets Ben casually with a high five behind Rey’s back to which he responds with an equally-casual, “Pager.”

“What the hell?” Rey is still squealing and grinning broadly as a homecoming queen at her de facto big sister and dear friend.

“Ben said you were bored,” Paige said as someone made space and she sat down next to Rey, explaining. “He texted last night and said he wanted to get me up here and I couldn’t say no. Vodka cranberry, please,” she interrupts herself to order a drink from the actual server who appears at her elbow mid story before continuing. “Texted my boss right away last night after Ben invited me, got on a plane this morning. Done and done,” she says, as if it is the simplest thing in the world, international, spur-of-the-moment air travel, as if she hasn’t just rocked Rey’s world completely.

“How did you get away with it? With your boss?” Rey asked, knowing Paige has a particularly prickly principal and she likes her middle school English teaching job fine.

“Dead grandparent. Vietnam. Very tragic,” Paige says, taking a sip of the water in front of her. “Don’t worry, I have two more grandparents to go still before they catch on. Now I have like 6 whole days off so, yay!” She sounds wholly unconcerned.

Rey just shakes her head, wide-eyed and grins at Paige before turning to Ben who is still listening.

“You did this,” she whispers, “you did this for me.”
“Baby doll, I’d do a whole lot more than that for you,” he said, kissing her nose and then her lips.

“Jesus, is this what we’ve gotta watch when you’ve got a girl, Solo?” one of the guys threw a napkin at him and Rey turned to Paige who was elbowing her while sipping her vodka cranberry through a tiny red straw and she leaned in closely to hear Paige’s whisper.

“Who the hell is that hunk of burning love?” Paige asked, motioning to Malaak, seated diagonally from her, across the table from Ben, quietly listening to the antics around them at the table. “He looks like a tatted-up, muscle-bound fucking lumberjack or something,” Paige said, eyeing his flannel shirt over a wide chest.

“That’s Mal,” Rey whispered back, hiding behind her water, “Malaak. He’s Ben’s bodyguard.”

“Looks like he could throttle a mountain lion with his bare hands,” she mused appreciatively, “I’d like to check him over for ticks,” Paige said.

Rey snorted and hid her laugh behind her napkin, coughing to clear her airway and Paige paid her zero attention whatsoever.

Rey smiled brightly, warm head to toe, basking in the joy of friendship and love, lighthearted and amused and suddenly in desperate love with Ben all over again, realizing he had made this possible.

“You’re incredible,” Rey wrapped her arms around Ben’s bicep and kissed his shoulder, and he leaned back in his chair and looked her in the eye.

“You don’t need rescue, I know,” Ben told her, “but, I felt like it was time to call for reinforcements.”

***************

“Those little whores,” Paige said the next morning when Rey filled her in, her eyes narrowed to angry slits as she seethed, listening to Rey detail the overheard conversation two days prior on set between the women who were planning on seducing Ben.

“Tell me about it,” Rey said, propping another hotel room pillow under her head where she was
laying sprawled out on Paige’s bed in the hotel where she and Ben were also staying, 7 floors above.

“What a couple of nasty little bitches,” Paige went on. “Show me who they are when we get on set later, I’ll deal with it,” Paige said.

“Pager, no,” Rey argued, “they aren’t worth it,” she insisted. “Besides, I have to know how to deal with this sort of bullshit if I’m going to be in this for the long haul with Ben.”

“Oh, please,” Paige said with a minor eye roll, “like you don’t know you’re soul mates, Reyrey. You know you’ll be with him forever, come on, give it up,” she teased, throwing an extra feather pillow at Rey.

Rey smiled at her and threw it back. “I’m so glad you’re here,” she said. “Want to go get Tim Horton’s for breakfast? I hear they have legendary donuts.”

“Tomorrow,” Paige said, “the masseuse will be here any minute for us.”

“Masseuse? Here?” Rey stuttered.

“Ben said to make sure we have a good time,” Paige said, defending herself as she let in the massage therapists who knocked on the door as they wheeled in the first of two portable massage tables, “and he put it all on his credit card so this? Is on Ben.”

Rey groaned slightly and threw her head back to laugh at the ceiling.

To: Ben
From: Rey
11:01 am
Paige ordered massages for us.
Your treat.
Am so sorry!
I love you.
To: Rey
From: Ben
11:51 am
Just take notes.
I’d like one, too.
From you.
Later.
Naked.
I love you, wife.

Fuck, Rey thought, reading her text from Ben while laying down on a massage table, her face peering through the hole in the cushion, feeling her body tighten up and thrum at that one word. Self, we have got to figure this out.

************************

“Which one was it?” Paige whispered to Rey from her chair inside the tent later on, between takes while they watched a scene being filmed between Ben, Charlotte and Anna-Delilah McIntosh, a decidedly un-French little girl cast as Mr. Rochester’s French ward, Adèle.

“Which one was what?” Rey asked.

“Was it THOT?” Paige asked.

“‘Thought’?” Rey confirmed. “What is ‘thought’?” she asked, thoroughly confused. “What are you even saying right now?”

“‘T.H.O.T.’…” Paige reiterated, almost annoyed. “That. Ho. Over. There.? Sheesh, Reyrey, get with the lingo, God.” Paige rolled her eyes briefly, much more in-tune with modern slang as a middle school teacher than Rey could ever hope to be. “Is that her? The one with the nasty coochie? Is that her?”
Rey turned her head slowly, arching to where Paige’s eyes were focused behind her left shoulder and she glimpsed Maggie and Cynthia standing nearby, cups of coffee in their hands, whispering behind their disposable cups.

“Oh, yes,” Rey exhaled a confirmation, turning around. “That’s them. Wait!” she called after Paige, who had already jumped down from her seat and made her way directly to the beverage table beside them.

Rey trailed her as fast as possible, hoping to diffuse the tension she felt amp up as soon as Paige laid eyes on the two women whose words had disturbed Rey the day before and she grabbed Paige’s elbow as she arrived at the table, not a moment too soon, before Paige could say a word.

“Oh, hey,” Cynthia, the redhead said to Rey as she slowed to a stop, Paige’s jacket still in her fist. “You’re Ben Solo’s girlfriend, right? I just wanted to introduce myself. I’m Cynthia. I know Ben from lots of other films. I just wanted to say hey.”

Paige met Rey’s eyes knowingly and then she gave the redhead who spoke a witheringly bored look while Rey gave a weakly false smile and said “oh, erm, Yeah. Hey.”

Paige cocked her head to the side listening with a withering glare of exhaustion and abhorrence as Cynthia went on.

“Well, I just wanted to say, ya know, if you ever end up coming out to L.A., hit me up. I’ll take you for a makeover. Or, like, whatever,” she said with a thinly veiled glaze of animosity. Maggie, the blonde stood next to her staring at Rey vapidly, silent.

“Huh,” Rey replied vaguely, neither accepting or rejecting the offer, just letting it all hang in the air between them, giving herself a moment to absorb the woman before her.

Paige snorted and gave Cynthia an unabashed once-over, a full, head-to-toe sweep of her dark eyes under black lashes before snickering to Rey and dismissing the redhead, turning her back to her altogether and turning to lead Rey away.

“What’s your problem?” Cynthia spit out in disgusted reply.

“Aw, listen sweetie, go find some other little girls to tease. The women are talking,” Paige told her flatly, fake sympathy tinting her tone.
Cynthia and Maggie both gave short, soft gasps, eyes widely horrified.

Cynthia’s eyes quickly rebounded though, to sharp, wicked angles, hand on her hip menacingly as she retorted to Paige, “you need a lesson in manners, cookie?”

“You need a swift kick in the taco, you whore?” Paige shot back, clearly locked and loaded and ready for aim before Rey could intercede.

Rey dragged Paige’s arm hard as Cynthia took a step closer to her, while Paige argued loudly enough for anyone, including the two women behind them to hear her as they marched out of the tent.

“I’m a middle school English teacher! I work in the fucking inner city! You don’t scare me! Come at me! I got receipts!”

***************

“What’s a ‘thought’?” Ben asked, legs hanging over the end of the couch in their suite, with Rey beside him as they chatted with Paige after they finished dinner.

“That’s what I said!” Rey agreed, giving Paige a pointed look while Paige finished the last slice of pizza on her plate room service had sent up.

“It means they’re sluts, Benny, that’s all. Human garbage who want to trip you up and turn your head and advance their own careers,” Paige said around a mouthful of cheesy sauce and crust.

“Well, that’s obviously never gonna happen,” Ben said, tossing a tennis ball he normally kept in his luggage at all times up into the air and catching it again before it hit his chest, Rey’s feet propped up on the coffee table between the couch and Paige on the opposite armchair, his head securely resting in her lap. “To be fair, a lot of the times in this business, women are expected to put out to get ahead. Not that I want to be part of that,” he added, quickly, “but, I know from my mom it’s a fairly standard practice to be expected to sleep your way through auditions. It’s a whole unhealthy culture.”

“That is one fucking toxic system,” Rey noted.
“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“Still,” Paige said, wiping her mouth delicately with a white, cloth napkin, “they’re trash. And they’re lucky I didn’t kick their nasty, ratchet asses all the way back to California from here.”

Rey smirked at her friend, appreciating having a big sister like Paige around, so thankful she didn’t have to carry this alone.

“And listen. Hey. You two,” Paige said, crossing her arms over her chest and then raising one hand to point at them each, eyebrows raised, as they turned their heads to her in unison. “You want this relationship to work? You’d better start using your big boy and big girl words.”

“What do you mean?” Rey asked as Paige cut her off.

“Reyrey, you need to tell your boyfriend here what goes on when the cameras are rolling and you’re left waiting in the wings. You need to tell him about Phasma and what she said, what kind of rumor she’s spreading and how she was talking about you two. And Ben, you love this woman? You need to prove it and protect her from this pack of vipers you work for because so far all I see is you work for some straight ass, fucked-up people. You two love each other? You want your relationship to last? You need to keep each other safe and you can only do that if you use your words and be honest with each other. I mean, I’m no expert but, I know enough to know you need to be honest with each other. About everything.”

Ben and Rey sat, slightly stunned and Ben lifted his head, twisted his body and turned to face Rey.

“What about Phasma? Baby, what happened?”

Rey took a deep sigh and looked at Paige pleadingly.

“Go on,” she insisted, standing.

Rey turned to Ben and swallowed.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” she said, stretching into a stand, “I’m going back to my room to order chocolate cake and eat it there. And maybe try out that massive bathtub. I think it has jets,” she said, moving to the door.
“’G’night, Pager, love you,” Rey called.

“Thanks, Paige,” Ben added.

Paige waved over her shoulder without turning and opened the door to the hallway, “love y’all, night,” and finally, once again, Rey had her boyfriend all to herself.

*Put on your big girl panties and deal with it,* Rey thought, turning her attention to Ben who was looking at her expectantly.

“Will you come get in bed with me while we talk, please?” Rey asked, deciding that would make her feel best.

“Meet you there,” Ben said, moving to turn off lights.

If this was what it took, Rey could do this.

Paige was right.

*The only thing to fear is fear itself,* she reminded herself and she looked down at her tattoo again, tracing it quickly with her fingers, *I don’t need rescue.*

Was this asking Ben for rescue?

Was it okay to include him in this?

Was she more trouble than she was worth?

Would this cost her?

Rey crawled into bed and looked up at Ben beside her, deep worry creasing his face as he cradled her face.

Rey took a deep breath and she moved in closer.
you guys, forgive me! I know this is late. I am sorry!!

Have this now, @rileybabe will add art when she wakes up, and True North will post in another 10 minutes.

Then, next week we shall resume our regularly-scheduled postings:
North Shore Chapter 16 Monday, May 28
and True North Chapter 10 Tuesday, May 29

xo
I love you, reader!
Berry
“It is also a victory
to know when to retreat.”

- Erno Paasalinna
“What can you see from your bed in California?” Rey asked on her final morning in Toronto, gazing out at the Toronto city skyline beside Ben, snacking on a bagel and lox, naked under the white hotel sheets of their bed. “Can you see the ocean?”

“Rooftops,” he replied, sipping black coffee, rubbing at his eyes, bare chested and beautiful beside her, gazing past her face at the picture window beyond the bed. “Nothing too special.”

“Well, that’s disappointing,” she teased him. “I thought everyone in California lived at the beach full-time!” she said with a smile.

Ben grinned at her and stole her bagel, chomping on it even as it overstuffed his mouth, bulging his cheek goofily, grinning at her proudly to have taken her beloved food off her plate.

“Hey!” she protested as he stole another bite stealthily, too fast to be stopped.

“I’ve been thinking about selling it anyway,” he said with a shrug, “I’d love something with more grass. Or any grass at all, really.”

“Oh yeah?” Rey asked, enamored with this conversation, a new one between them and enjoying the experience of lounging in bed with her boyfriend, a morning off from set to see one another in a relaxed environment a precious commodity. “And what are you going to do with all your new grass, hmm? Buy a lawnmower and let me come out to California and watch my big, strong boyfriend mow the yard, all sweaty and hot?”

Rey watched with glee as Ben moved the dishes off her lap with a predatory gleam in his eye and taunted him mercilessly as he stalked towards her on the bed they shared.

“You gonna be shirtless and make me swoon, Ben Solo? Hmm? Is that it?” she asked as he crawled up her body, nuzzling her neck with kisses and pulling her closer as she teased him.

“Yeah, I’m gonna get you to pour me a big glass of lemonade and work out all my yard maintenance worker and housewife fantasies,” he said with a vicious grin, kissing her good and deep as he settled between her legs.

“Well now, that’s a new one for me but, I’m definitely taking that mental image home with me to Chattanooga!” she said emphatically, kissing him back.
“Maybe I’ll get a dog,” Ben murmured at her lips, his hands sliding under the sheets to palm her breast. “Or no, wait…a cat? Do you want a cat?”

“Dog,” Rey said, running her hands over his back, “definitely a dog,” she nodded. “A cute one.”

“A cute dog,” Ben said. “Got it. What else can I put in this imaginary house to get you to move out to California?”

Rey stilled under his hands.

Probably, she shouldn’t have been surprised by his comment.

She wanted them to live together. She loved Ben more than any soul on earth, it wasn’t that she doubted it even for a moment. It’s only that her life was so far removed from his both by distance and circumstances and the chasm between them it created still so wide, she was at a loss how to cross it.

“You…you want me to move out to California?” she asked.

“Well,” Ben began, “I mean, first I want you to come and see it. Come visit me and let me introduce you to where I live, where I’m from. And then yes, I want to have a conversation about how to get you and me living in the same state. Does that surprise you, baby?”

“No, no, of course not,” Rey said quickly, seeing she was dangerously close to hurting him with rejection. “I just…I hadn’t really thought about moving. Per se,” she said, adding, “yet.”

“Would you be willing to come visit?” he asked.

“Of course! Yes! And it will be so much easier now that I’ve gotten to fly on a plane with you,” she said.

“Would you ever be willing to leave Chattanooga, do you think?” he asked, tentatively.

It’s not that she didn’t want to live with Ben. She very much did.
She could imagine Farmer’s Market Saturday morning strolls and walks on the beach holding wine glasses and late Netflix nights with his head in her lap and her heart at peace, no longer having sex through a phone screen, waiting for him to pick up a FaceTime ring tone, even having a dog together.

A child together. Or more.

There was nothing she didn’t want with Ben.

He just lived so damn far away.

Far from Finn, far from the Resistance, far from Rose and Gun and Paige and Poe.

Far from everything that she knew, the whole North Shore, and everything that was her home… except the single most important thing: himself.

“I would,” she said, knowing it to be true. “I would for you.”

Ben leaned forward and kissed her.

“I love you, Rey,” he said. “You don’t know what you give to me, baby doll, you just don’t but, I want you to know this: you are what I need. This last few days with you here…it’s been the best filming experience of my life.”

Rey smiled at him, running her fingers through his hair.

“I love you back,” she told him, already dreading leaving him. “Ben, I’d go anywhere to be with you.”

His face while she gazed at him held a look of amazement and Rey realized how much she needed to try.

She could never give him up and if that meant getting on an airplane or moving across the country or going on location, she just needed to try.

It wasn’t her favorite thing in the world, being on location - the mean girls, the weather, the hotel life, even the schedule was a challenge but for a life with Ben?

She would try.

What alternative was there?
Ben hopped out of bed after kissing her forehead and stood beside the bed while making a phone call on the hotel land line, looking at Rey as he spoke.

“Yes, hi,” he said into the phone, with a wink thrown at Rey where she lay in the bed, “would you please send my wife up another bagel and lox? Thanks.”

Rey grinned up at him and laughed out loud, tossing a pillow at him which he caught before tossing it back on the bed.

“I know how to ply you to get my way,” he said wickedly, crawling back into bed beside her and getting into her personal space.

There were crumbs on the sheets and they both needed showers, and Rey had no idea where her panties were.

She hadn’t been home in 5 days, hadn’t spent a dollar the whole trip, and she was happy and lighter than air.

Maybe being on location wasn’t such a bad idea after all, she thought, as Ben pulled her on top of himself while he laid down, their lips sliding over one another’s in practiced harmony, her body getting wet at his heat underneath her, hopeful there was time enough for another go.

A girl could get used to this life, actually.

Come to think of it, this was actually amazing and Rey was crazy not to leap at the chance to jump in feet-first.

“That was quick,” Ben said when the rap came on the door signaling room service delivery. “I’ll get it,” he said, moving out from under Rey. “This way you’ll stay naked.”

She sighed as she marched away, pulling a fluffy, white, hotel-issue robe around himself to answer the door and she listened for what should have been a simple hand-off of a rolling table with food or at least a hotel employee with a tray to deliver but instead she distinctly heard Ben’s voice in what sounded like…an argument? A conflict?

And then the tell-tale sign of trouble: Hux.

Rey rose quietly from the bed and slowly crept towards the doorway to the suite’s sitting room to
listen, knowing Ben would be shielding her from whatever ugliness she could tell was going on between them.

“It’s always something with you, isn’t it?” Hux huffed, clearly perturbed.

“Ya know Hux, I don’t answer to you. I don’t know why you seem to think I do but I assure you,” Ben said with a dry, mirthless chuckle, “I do not fucking work for you.”

“Alright Solo, alright,” Hux said. “That’s fine. You don’t work for me. Fine. Who do you work for then, hmm? Is it the crew? All those ex-Marines and ex-sailors and ex-military recruits out there on set right now who would be standing around with their dicks in their hands if they didn’t have you to get them hired for all the films you make? Do you work for them?”

Hux took a breath.

“Or how about Rey, do you work for her now? You just go around and fire anybody she runs and tattles to you about who’s looked at her cross-eyed? Do you work for her?” Hux spit.

“Hux,” Ben’s voice was laced with poison, fury barely concealed, “I swear to God, if you don’t shut the fuck up and get the fuck out of this room right now, I am going to hit you.”

“Great, Solo,” Hux said, his voice thinning as Rey assumed he was heading for the door, “that’s great. More exemplary behavior from our star,” Hux taunted. “You know, I just want to thank you for being so easy to manage these last few months. Really making my job a fucking dream.”

“Aw, ya know what Hux, shut the fuck up. Goddamn, do you ever stop talking?” Ben whined, more annoyed than menacing as Hux moved to leave.

“Lucky for you, I really don’t, Solo. Lucky for you I’m here to clean up after you like one of the clowns at the goddamn fucking circus who cleans up the huge shit pile the elephants leave in the middle of the three ring circus because that’s what you leave, pal. A big, nasty mess of a fucking pile of shit behind you wherever you go. And I come behind you and clean it up. So, you just think about this while you’re going around firing people willy-nilly without so much as a ‘how do you do’. We as a team have been very successful at making a substantial amount of money, a very substantial amount of money on all the films we have partnered through, and that includes myself and Phasma. It’s not just you, hot shot, all the money for all the people is because it’s all made in a team effort. And you just broke up the team.”
Rey strained to hear as she heard a pause and then the door open before Hux took a parting shot.

“Try to remember that next time before you take any more hiring and firing directives from your girlfriend,” he snarled before leaving and shutting the door tightly behind him with a click.

Rey peeked around the corner after a moment and stole a glance at Ben. He was still standing in the center of the room, his stance wide as it must have been when fighting with Hux, and his head tilted back so his closed eyes faced the ceiling.

She wondered if he was trying to get himself under control.

She wondered if he was trying not to drink.

She wondered how anyone could refrain from being driven to drink by Hux and his personal brand of nasty animosity.

“Rey,” Ben called, his voice shot through with the hopelessness Rey had come to associate with Hux. “Can you come here?”

Rey moved towards him and met him on the couch, unsure what he would say, angry she was being blamed for Phasma’s firing, and frustrated Hux got away with yelling insults at Ben again.

“Baby, don’t take that to heart,” Ben said, knowing she could only have overheard the conversation with Hux in the small space. “It wouldn’t have mattered if I’d told him before or after, she needed to go and that was final.”

Rey groaned and roller her head other neck, uncomfortable with this whole, messy business with Phasma, her responsibility in the whole fiasco somehow different depending on who you spoke with about it, on which day. The only ones who never wavered were Ben and Paige who maintained resolutely Rey had done nothing wrong and Phasma flat-out needed to be fired.

And that Phasma was a stone cold bitch whose tits could rot off but, that last part was only Paige, not Ben.

“You can’t listen to Hux,” Ben insisted, “you can’t listen to a word he says.”

“Well, why do you then?” Rey countered. “I’m serious Ben, why do you put up with that weasly asshole? He treats you like shit and it burns me up.”
“I put up with him because first of all, I have a contract with him. And second of all, he’s right, we have been very successful. And third of all, he’s just an asshole with a big fucking mouth but, he’s very effective at his job and I can put up with a little smart mouth from time to time for the greater good.”

“Well, I hate it,” she pouted at him, “I hate how he talks to you, Ben. You don’t deserve that - no one deserves that! I hate it.”

“Thank you, baby doll,” he said with a smile, pulling her close on the couch with her arms crossed over her chest tightly, smiling into the crown of her head. “I appreciate that.”

Rey sulked one more minute till Ben tugged her chin up to look into his eyes.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

Rey leaned up and kissed her boyfriend, trying to funnel all her love into her kiss, to soothe away the hurtful insults Hux was so adept at tossing out heartlessly, and a knock on the door interrupted them.

Ben threw his head backward in dramatic complaint as Rey smirked at him and tightened the belt around her own robe as she moved to get the door.

“I’ll get it, I’ll get it. Don’t get up,” she smiled at him, receiving her second breakfast.

She thanked the employee and placed the plate on the table before dropping the robe once the door was locked, sauntering past her man with a wink as he leapt off the couch and raced her to the bathroom, scooping her off the floor and into his arms with a squeal as the water started and the day rebooted and Rey pondered how to make the most of her final hours with Ben.

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“So, you’re coming to California,” Ben asked for the thousandth time as he held Rey’s face in his
hands, her messenger bag over her shoulder and her favorite new sweater, powder pink, way oversized, off the shoulder and cable knit, fluffy enough Ben couldn’t keep his hands from touching it and Rey looked forward to wrapping herself in it as if the clouds alone carried her home to Tennessee once she and Paige boarded the plane in an hour.

Rey rolled her eyes hard and looked up at him, feigning exhaustion.

“Yes, boyfriend, I am coming to California,” she whined, making him smirk.

“Say husband.”

Rey bit her lip and kissed him, but stayed where she was as she whispered at his mouth, “husband, I’m coming,” as seductively as she could, knowing her use of double entendre was sure to drive him wild and pleased with herself for making him so.

“Fuck,” he whispered back at her, still holding her face in his hands, his lips skimming and smudging over hers, his tongue reaching to lick the edge of her skin til it shot sparks up her spine. “That was cruel and you know it.”

Rey smiled victoriously, a feeling that lasted 0.02 seconds before she wilted and tears filled her eyes to the pupils, welling so quickly without spilling her vision blurred.

“Baby doll,” Ben said as he moved to kiss her and pull her close, “please. Baby, please don’t cry,” he implored her.

“I can’t help it,” she said, annoyed with herself as usual in moments of separation from Ben that she was an emotional wreck - flirty and shameless one minute, weepy and inconsolable the next. “I don’t want to leave you. Ben, I hate having to leave you.”

She sniffled while he wiped her tears and kissed her face, her hair, her lips.

“Me too, beautiful. I hate it so much, Rey, I feel like my heart is being ripped out of my chest letting you go. Seeing you cry,” he said, concern creasing his handsome brow as Rey stood trying to get herself together, determined not to drag him down into despair with her, though she knew it was the only thing awaiting her at the end of the corridor, the gate, the jetway.
She sniffled hard and took a deep breath, steeling herself for her departure and turned to wave to Paige who had moved to give them a respectful distance as the said their goodbyes which, granted, at this point had lasted beyond the ten-minute mark.

“I’m okay,” she said, trying her hardest to convince both of them it was the truth. “I’m just gonna go through security, hang out with Paige, get back to work and before you know it, you’ll be home in California and you’ll want me to come out there and visit and I will. I’m okay.”

“What about me?” Ben said with a sad smile. “What if I’m not okay?” He traced her cheekbones with his thumbs as Rey smiled weakly, and reached on her toes to kiss him.

“I love you so much,” she told him.

“God, this is the hardest thing I feel like I’ve ever done. Rey, I love you so much.”

Paige walked up to Rey’s shoulder and cleared her throat noisily.

“Um, hey, lovers,” she started, “don’t wanna miss our plane.”

Several heated, tightly-laced embraces and tender kisses later, Rey and Paige walked to security where they would pass the point of no return and begin the trip back to the North Shore without Ben.

Rey turned one last time to wave and blow him a kiss when she put her belongings on the conveyor belt, the last chance to glimpse him and he blew her one in return before stuffing his hands into his pockets, his shoulders pulled up near his ears, looking far too single, too handsome, too sad for Rey to be stoic and once she rounded the corner out of sight she let the tears fall again down her cheeks.

Paige held her arm around Rey’s shoulders as they walked barefoot through security in the Toronto airport, wordlessly maneuvering them both through the crowded lines and by the time they went to buy a magazine on the other side of the security checkpoint, Rey was breathing normally.

She resolutely skipped over celebrity rag mags like US Weekly which sported a glossy photo of Jennifer Allison in a corner of its cover and chose a Better Homes and Gardens, thinking about grass and a cute dog and California and Ben.

When she buckled into the seat beside Paige, the bright blue sky shone around them with a cheerful
ferocity, begging them to even attempt to be unhappy, and Rey felt her heart lift with the plane wheels as Toronto shrunk beneath them, smaller and smaller in a moment, as if the whole city could be folded up and placed in your pocket at a moment’s notice.

Somewhere down there was her Ben, her sweet man, and she wanted so much to be worthy of his loving devotion, having enjoyed it in so many ways this week.

If he wanted her to come to California, she was absolutely going to and as soon as she landed she was going to text Mal and make a plan for Ben’s return to California, not even wanting to wait until he was done shooting tonight to ask when that would be.

“Hey,” Rey said, turning to Paige slowly, surveying her as she perused a Vogue critically.

“I had a thought,” Rey said slowly, the wheels in her head turning.

“Hmm?” Paige asked. “Look at this, what the fuck even is this pose? Who stands like that?” she asked, folding a page back in the shiny magazine to get Rey’s opinion on one of the waif like models sporting the latest Milanese fashions.


“Well,” Rey started, “what would you think if I maybe set you up with him? You know like, not necessarily saying you have to like, marry him or anything but, it might be nice to see what might happen between you two.”

Rey waited while Paige flipped another few pages, looking down at her magazine and she continued.

“Just cause you know, you’re single and he’s single and you’re both so cute and pretty and likable and…I dunno. I just thought maybe you might work. A little. Or maybe not. Maybe not so much? You’re not saying anything. Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Paige took a sip of her ginger ale and put it back down before grinning at Rey and looking back at her magazine with a head shake and an audibly amused sigh.
“See, that’s what I love about you, Reyrey,” she said. “Still so innocent. It’s adorable.”

Rey blinked while Paige continued skimming pages.

“Honey, I started banging him the night I got to town. He’s an incredible lay.”

It took Rey a full five seconds to process with a gaping jaw before she spit her water out a little, laughing loudly and Paige just kept shaking her head while she took another drink and smiled at Rey, winking at her as Rey finally quieted down.

It was Rey’s second airplane ride and as long as she was always this entertained and diverted, she thought maybe she could become a frequent flier of the friendly skies after all.

**********

To: Mal
From: Rey
5:22 pm
Hey Mal,
when will you guys be back in CA?

To: Rey
From: Mal
5:41 pm
Hello Rey.
Should be 02/04.

To: Mal
From: Rey
“Listen to me,” Ben was saying, the dark room behind him illuminated only by the phone he held in his hand while they talked and said their goodnights. “Baby doll, nobody but nobody is going to talk to you or about you that way. I’m serious. It’s just not happening,” he said firmly. “She was not going to stay on my payroll talking about my baby like that. No way in hell. I don’t regret it at all, I only wish you’d been spared having to hear that shit.”

Rey was wallowing.

She’d had such a nice time on the flight, somehow feeling light as a feather and pleased as punch, optimistic and hopeful and beautiful…and then within the space of 5 hours alone in her dark apartment on the North Shore of Chattanooga, the chill of January settled into her apartment like a cold, dark cell, the echoing emptiness of a space without Ben’s deep timbre beside her, reverberating through her body, even Rose’s homemade cranberry nut muffins standing in Tupperware with a note saying she was loved and to call when she got home, the truth was Rey no longer felt at home and she sank hard into sadness as she came off the high.

She missed Ben too acutely to feel comfortable even here in her apartment without him here anymore and the more she mourned his presence, the more she reflected on her time in Canada, all the things she’d seen and learned, all the feelings she’d waded through waist-deep and frankly, poorly prepared to face, no more dressed for it than she had been for the Canadian winter weather, relying on Ben to shop, dress, defend and educate her.

She needed to gather herself and arm up.

She was going to need a strategy if she was going to go try to figure out how to merge her life with his, that much was clear now, and before that she needed to retreat, regroup and reposition herself to charge.

If that’s what she was doing back home in Tennessee alone, she could do it.

She had a goal if that was the case, she had a mission, and she knew she would stop at nothing to deserve the love of a man who fought for jobs for people he was responsible for, who fired
disloyal, bitter employees when they hurt her, who went to AA and worked hard on set and payed for everyone, for everything, everywhere they went, and still smiled at her like she was a goddess, the sun and the moon and the stars on his face when she saw what reflected in his eyes.

“I love you, husband,” Rey said, speaking his language, fierce love distilled and coursing through her veins like moonshine. “I’ll love you forever and I’ll come to California. Just the minute you get there, Ben, I will step off a plane and come be with you because I love you and I can’t live without you.”

“Woah,” Ben said as he raised his eyebrows, not used to hearing declarations of love that blatant, that risky very often from his girlfriend. “Well, hallelujah, baby doll! That’s more like it!”

Rey bit her lip and chuckled at him, enjoying how she shocked him.

“Hey,” he whispered, “show my your pretty tits, will you? Please? I wanna see them so bad, baby.”

Rey grinned at him and slipped her fuzzy sweater off, already having lost her bra with no one around the apartment but herself, and she switched gears to please this beautiful man of hers anyway she could.

It wouldn’t be difficult.

She knew what he wanted.

And she was ready to provide. To reciprocate.

Now, she just had to make about one million little details happen.
Chapter Summary

If you can listen to Stevie Nicks' "Edge of Seventeen" without singing, bouncing and pumping the volume, check your pulse.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn8-4tjPxD8

moodboard by my sweet @rileybabe
beta'd by my sweet @uselessenglishmajor

True North tomorrow. xoxo

Berry
"When things get rough,
a breakthrough is just on the
other side of pain."
- Shirley MacLaine

***************

Whatever she had been expecting to feel upon arriving back in Tennessee, Rey was quickly figuring out, this was decidedly not it.

Things were getting done, of course - it’s not that she was neglecting her responsibilities - it was all getting done, it just wasn’t fun.

Each day she woke up, went to open The Resistance, dropped her keys and bag, made her way through the store flipping on lights, opening mail, picking out a video and popping it in the VHS player, getting coffee or greeting Finn but, all the while her heart dragged behind her like Jacob Marley’s chains in A Christmas Carol.

She found herself gravitating towards Katherine Hepburn, playing The African Queen and Bringing Up Baby and The Rainmaker, hoping the silver screen legend would woo her out of her quietly bored, slightly melancholy reverie, hopefully spiraling her into another time and place, thinking perhaps her idol’s melodically dramatic mid-Atlantic accent would transport her but, January crept along at a mind-numbingly slow pace and more than once Rey fell asleep at the counter.

Ben was shooting in Toronto for the balance of the month and Rey couldn’t decide if it was better or worse now that she could picture him there, could imagine him moving around the sets, talking with the people she’d met, sleeping in the bed they’d shared.

It kind of helped and also kind of hard-core sucked.

She couldn’t help but think about the slutty bit-part actresses who circled him like vultures, of Hux who lived to snap the reins around Ben whenever he could, of all she was missing being with him, especially the profound joy of just going through the day together with her boyfriend she’d gotten so used to so quickly, and by the time she got a group text from Rosie, she had been sleepwalking through life for a solid week.

From Rose: Bonfire at Gun’s farm Saturday night @7. Will provide smores! Everybody in?
From Poe: Yeah, baby!

From Finn: Hells yea, boi!

From Paige: Rosie, can you get some Reese’s for the smores, plz?

From Rey: Literally, I feel like now I can go on with life. All the yes!

From Gun: I’ve got plenty of chairs, just BYOB.

From Rose: Dress warmly! Kisses!

This at least would be a great reason to wash the remainder of her clothes from her Canada trip she hadn’t been in a hurry to look at, each item bought for her by Ben, picked out with her in mind and carrying something of his scent, their time together, her memories. She didn’t have much to wear without washing clothes though, and she was looking a bit rough in general, her eyebrows getting unruly and her hair needing washing.

A night out was just what the doctor ordered.

Saturday arrived and Rey locked up with some pep in her step for the first time since she left Ben at the airport. She called him as she walked home from Resistance, intending to leave a message and felt her face break into a smile when she heard him answer.

“Well, hi!” she chirped, her pep increasing to a full-on bounce at his voice.

“Hey, beautiful,” he replied, the smile in his voice evident. “Just got done shooting for the day, I was gonna call you in a little bit. You’re going to Rosie and Gun’s tonight, huh?”

“Yep,” she said, “feels so good to have something to take my mind off how desperately I miss
Ben groaned a little and agreed. “I know baby, I know. I miss you so much it’s nuts.”

A silence hung between them as it normally did while they took internal stock of how uncomfortable the separation was and tried to move past it to make use of the phone time.

“What are you up to tonight, handsome? Any Saturday night shindigs for you?” Rey intended it to sound curious and she hated the way possessiveness shadowed her tone with an edge. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her boyfriend, her brain just couldn’t help but conjure images of women draped all over him while she wasn’t there to make up the negative space around him in person, herself.

“Aw, nothing big,” he replied with an exhale as Rey heard him drop into a seat, probably putting his feet up, probably stretching out, probably propping his arm behind his head, probably leaving space right beside him. “Hanging out with the crew tonight. Probably go to bed early without you here to ravage.”

Rey groaned and flopped onto her own couch as she let herself into her chilly apartment alone.

“Ugh, it shouldn’t be legal to miss someone this much,” she whined.

“I know, my baby,” Ben agreed. “Fucking hate it. Call you later? After?”

“Yes, please,” she said. “If I don’t call you first. Hey, have fun tonight,” she urged him, likely speaking to both of them as she said the words.

“You too, and tell everyone I said hi. I love you, baby doll,” he said.

“I love you, Ben.”

*************

Rey climbed happily into an adirondack between Paige and Finn in Gun’s backyard as they watched the flames Poe and Gun took turns stoking kicked up in the pit encircled by all their
respective chairs.

The ride up to Soddy-Daisy from the North Shore behind Rose’s seat, Rey mostly sat staring out the window as the hills scooted by, dead grass and skeletal trees flanking the interstate as they drove, Stevie Nicks’ signature vibrato crooning “Edge of Seventeen” smokily on the radio while Paige and Rose in the front seat belted out the tune heartily.

“Just like the white winged dove
Sings a song, sounds like she's singing
Ooo, ooo, ooo.”

“Everything’s grey,” Rey had noted as they drove. “Grey, grey, grey.”

Rose looked over in the rearview mirror at her friend and rolled her eyes hard enough to dislodge them at Paige beside her but, said nothing, turned up the radio and continued driving.

Rey knew she was being a drag but, she couldn’t find the will to change her mood or the gumption to address it anytime soon. Every inch of the Tennessee January landscape was as bleak as her thoughts, compounding and confirming her dreary state.

If she had said that out loud, it would mean another eyeroll so, she had bitten her tongue and sighed loudly instead, watching the city roads melt into country lanes as they made their way towards Gun’s home.

“Now, this is how you do it,” Paige said, sandwiching a toasted marshmallow between graham crackers and a full-size Reese’s cup, eschewing the traditional Hershey’s bar for something more exotic. She moaned noisily as she bit into the sweet concoction, closing her eyes and swaying happily to a tune only she could hear as she ate it, swaying back and forth in front of the fire as if in a trance.

“You look like you’re making love to it,” Finn said with a snort, shaking his head beside Rey.

“I am,” Paige said, her mouth still full of the sweet confection.

“Yeah, smores are strangely erotic,” Poe agreed. “They’re almost…sensual,” he said, licking the oozing chocolate of his own smores, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.
“Oh my God,” Finn said in emphatic embarrassment, laughing at his fiancé. “I love you but, you are over the fucking top.”

Poe sat down on Finn’s lap and promptly began teasing him, cracking up the crowd around them as he smeared chocolate on Finn’s face and held his jaw tightly in his hand as he gave a wide lick up his cheek to clean it off, murmuring at him. “Tell me that’s not sensual, tell me, tell me that smores aren’t the sexiest dessert ever” causing a sparring match between the two men that felt just this side of appropriate as Finn retaliated and they got lost amusing themselves for a moment while Rey watched them and the fire beyond them, barely aware she was still holding a smore in her own hand.

“You’re like the saddest girl ever to hold chocolate,” Paige noted, gesturing at Rey. “Snap out of it, would you?”

“I’m sorry,” Rey said, shaking her head to clear her mind from the hypnosis of the flames. “I’m a little out of it.”

“You’ve been out of it ever since you got back from Toronto,” Rose said, thinly-veiled annoyance buried in her tone. “You’re not yourself, Reyrey. You’ve barely smiled in a week. You’re depressed, sweetie.”

“I’m not depressed,” Rey said defending herself. “I’m just blue, that’s all. I’m down. I miss Ben, is all.”

“We know, it’s okay, Peanut,” Finn said, sending an admonishing look at Rose across the fire. “We know you miss him. It’s okay to be depressed over it. We have our significant others here with us, don’t we, Ro, and you don’t. So, don’t feel bad about missing Ben. Hell, I miss Ben, too,” he said, nudging Rey’s elbow on her chair’s arm where it lay.

“I’m not depressed,” she reiterated, “I’m fine. Really. I’m just down,” Rey said as her smores’ melted chocolate dripped onto the grass, still uneaten.

“Alright, I apologize. You’re right, Finn, we have Gun and Poe here with us and Reyrey, you are allowed to miss Ben and you are allowed to be as depressed as you need to be about it,” Rose said.

“I’m not depressed!” Rey shouted, “I’m not! I just miss him and think about him and cry for him and spend time thinking about him and I can’t figure out how to be happy,” she said, the gears
turning in her head. “Oh,” she said. “I think I’m a little depressed.”

She smiled weakly around the circle and hung her head. “Ugh, I didn’t think falling in love would ruin my life like this,” she moaned.

“Yeah, it’s the fucking worst,” Paige said, taking a swig of beer, “but, sex makes up for it, so…” she trailed off.

Rey sighed deeply.

It hurt to think she was broken enough being without Ben everyone could tell just by being around her but, she didn’t have the energy to attempt to convey anything else. She couldn’t remember being this tired in a long time and sitting in front of the cozy fire like this, she felt herself being lulled to sleep, the dark country night feeling more like 11 pm than 8.

“Oh, we’ve got to tell you guys something, and now’s as good a time as any, I think,” Finn said, looking at Poe in the eye who nodded and moved to stand in front of the fire, staring into the flames with his hands laced behind him.

“Well,” Finn said, drawing a deep breath, “when we went out to Texas to Poe’s mom’s house for Christmas, we had a good time. Ya know? Texas is…well, it’s very proud of itself, for one thing. That’s like, the biggest thing about Texas - they love them some Texas - but, just being out there with her was good for us. It was good for her, more importantly.”

Finn looked at Rey and continued.

“And, we started talking about what it would be like to live by her, help take care of her. You know, her cancer is gone for now but, the doctors expect it will recur at some point and when it does, me and Poe would already be in Brownsville with her.” Finn continued, pausing to look at Rey directly beside him.

“It would mean moving down to Texas for good,” he went on. “So, Poe went ahead and just looked for some teaching positions, just to look into it, just to feel it out, ya know, and there’s a great job down there for him, if he wants to go for it. University Texas Brownsville is a great school, actually, and they really want Poe to come teach grad level business there and it would be a great career move for him.”

“You already applied for a job?” Rose squeaked.
“I did,” Poe said gently. “It’s not that we don’t love you guys,” he said, “we do, of course we do! I just want to take care of my responsibilities with my mama, you guys.”

“Aren’t too many grad level business professors who speak fluent Spanish, I guess,” Finn added. “They’re fucking chasing Poe down trying to get him to come work down there.”

Poe blanched and smiled, turning to face Finn, “well, I wouldn’t go that far,” he said, “but yeah, it’s a great opportunity.”

The pride on Finn’s face as he gazed up at his fiancé beside him in the firelight was simply beautiful, his love for the man written all over his face in a way Rey could imagine was what she looked like when she watched Ben.

“So, you’ve taken the job then?” Gun asked, piping up.

“No, no,” Poe said, turning to face him, “not yet. Needed to think about it. And frankly, Rey,” he said, swiveling to face her, “we needed to talk with you about it.”

Rey looked between and Finn and Poe, all her memories of Finn flashing across her mind in quick succession, from middle school to college to beyond, and she thought about how much she loved Finn and wanted good things for him and it was very easy to smile for the first time in a week.

“Finn,” she said with resolve, “I know you want to be fair to me but, seriously, you can’t make this decision based on me.”

“I just know I’d be leaving you in a lurch,” Finn said. “I could stay as long as you need me, and do whatever you want to help you find a replacement or another partner,” he offered quickly. “I can do whatever I need to help you stay afloat with Resistance, Peanut.”

“Oh, Finn,” Rey said, her mind swimming and her heart overfilled with conflicting emotions, happy for her best friend and sad at his potential move at the same time. “I appreciate it but, you know I would never want to keep you from moving with your husband.”

“Well, I love you,” he said simply, “you’re more than my partner, you’re my person, Peanut, and I
want to be sure you can make it on your own at The Resistance. I don’t want to leave you alone, ya know?”

“I appreciate it,” she said tenderly. “But, you gotta do what you gotta do. And this sounds so exciting! Poe, this sounds so exciting for you!” she said, turning attention to Poe, causing everyone to praise his gutsy career move and in-demand status.

Finn was still looking at Rey apologetically, a wounded look on his face, needing her attendance when she turned back to him.

Rey smiled at him and placed a hand on his arm.

“S’okay, Finn,” she said. “We’ll figure it out. It’ll be okay. Promise. Okay?”

The group spent some more time talking logistics as Rey felt her excited grin relax into a passive smile, careful to exude peaceful joy for her friends while her mind ran a mile a minute through details: the store, the money, the time, and in big, block letters, underneath it all, a single word: *ALONE*.

She was so *done* with being alone but, it always came back to this, didn’t it?

Rey watched as the marshmallow pierced onto the end of her stick warmed over the flames, brown curling around the mitered edges of the white, soft candy, black bubbling further as it darkened and melted, the interior heating as the outside wilted and distorted, and she caught it at the last second before it collapsed from the stick onto the dark grass underneath her.

She had no appetite suddenly, handing the perfectly-crafted smore to Gun who stood beside her chair and hummed happily as he deposited the entire thing in his mouth without another word, winking at Rey as he moved around the fire back to Rosie, whom he lifted as he sat beneath her and snuggled into her neck.

“So, Reyrey,” Rose piped up, licking her fingers clean from the sticky goodness adhered to her hands, “when are you seeing Ben again?”

“He wants me to fly out next month,” Rey said, “to California.”

“Ooh! Awesome, dude! Totally radical!” Paige said with a giggle, hanging ten with her fingers and adopting a West Coast surfer accent. “Far out,” she said, bobbing her head at Rey.
“You gonna do it?” Poe asked, realizing Rey hadn’t said she was going, only that Ben had suggested it.

“Yes,” Rey said resolutely. “I definitely, definitely am going to do it,” she said, feeling her stomach twist at the reminder of a cross-country flight alone, the unknown at the other end.

Everything she knew was right here, right around this circle and she felt even more insecurity than ever knowing it was changing even as they sat here tonight, gathered by a fire.

Poe and Finn were leaving - leaving - and the home base that felt secure enough to give her a safe takeoff and landing suddenly felt like a roasted marshmallow, shrinking and distorting and melting into a liquid instead of a solid.

“Good,” Paige said, looking at Rey intently across the flames, the her face lit like a fierce fire goddess, embers flying around her like a burnished aura. “You need him. And I know Benny well enough to tell you this much, too: he needs you, girl.”

Rey smiled and sent a beam of love back to Paige.

“Ya know, you’re so lucky,” Paige went on, reaching to crack open another beer. “You been sitting in that little video shop all these years, surrounded by other people’s love stories, just listening to them play in your ears and watching them happen on a TV screen, and now here you are, living your very own love story and it’s even better than all those movies.” She shook her head gently and grinned at Rey.

“Yeah,” Finn agreed, “and the universe knew you well enough to know you’d need to get dropped on your ass to figure it out.”

“Yeah,” Rose added, “and the universe knew he’d have to come to you, and be hot as hell to get your attention.”

Everyone took a minute to laugh at Rey’s helplessly clueless romantic mind as Rey gave a hearty fake laugh. “Ha, ha, ha, you guys. Hardy har har,” she said.

“Good thing you’ve been watching all those made-up love stories all this time,” Gun said. “What if you didn’t recognize something even better when it walked into your life?”
Rey felt herself refuel hope and something like a stake planted itself deeply into her heart’s soil.

They were right.

They were so right.

What she had with Ben was real and it needed to be tended.

All those movies ended after 90 minutes. All the movies she loved and knew by heart that lined the shelves she sat surrounded by at The Resistance every day, all the romantic climaxes, the story arcs, the kisses and embraces and happily ever afters she’d watched for years on film.

This was better.

They were so right, her friends.

If her foundation crumbled, she knew just what would catch her before she fell to the grass.

She reached for her own water and took a swig, her mouth welcoming the fresh, clean water to wash away the sugar, her thoughts dying down with the fire when it was time to head back, climbing into Rose’s car and driving home with Bon Jovi blasting and when he sang “take my hand, and we’ll make it, I swear,” Rey smiled and sang along at the top of her lungs, too.

************
Chapter Summary

Longest. Chapter. Yet.
Continuation in the following chapter...dropping soon.

Double True North will follow so as not to give anything away. These chapters are chock full of surprises I've had buried up my sleeve for months!
PHOTOS of THIS chapter's locations on my tumblr here:

strawberrycupcakehuckleberrypie.tumblr.com

Thanks for being patient!
Your kudos, comments and love are BEYOND encouraging - they are my lifeblood and propulsion to keep writing.
You're the wind in my sails, you cute chickens!

xox
Berry
moody, gorgeous, arty moodboard by @rileybabe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“I remember being absolutely rocked
by how profoundly I could love
another human being.”

- Cheryl Strayed

************

If the North Shore had been an field of emotional landmines Rey had navigated carefully if not always successfully throughout December, January was proving to be a barren, icy tundra, and she
slid along trying to stay upright while her feet slid the opposite way of her heart with every step.

Somehow, Ben seemed to be faring much better up in the frozen Canadian city of Toronto while he filmed *Jane Eyre* than she was, way down in the cloudy chill of a southern mid-winter, despite the lack of actual snow, and she burrowed deeply into her fleece North Face jacket behind the counter at the Resistance scowling most days, her mood as grim as the sky and cement and Tennessee River, all oppressively varying, bleak shades of grey and even darker grey.

She couldn’t get excited about her lattes from Maz’s Mug because peppermint wasn’t available anymore and somehow the lattes she’d once enjoyed tasted terrible without the flavoring.

She pouted as she locked up alone in the evenings and barely dragged herself to her apartment, falling asleep on the couch without even making dinner twice in the last week, only waking when Ben called and her phone brightened with his concerned and amused face smiling at her disheveled sleepiness.

She tried to get interested in whatever movie was playing while she worked, Finn tempting her with her favorites day after day but somehow, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* made her weep when it ended, and she put her head down and fell asleep at the counter while watching *The Sound of Music*, so he finally made her a pallet on the floor of Resistance where she would crawl and catnap every afternoon.

Apparently, having Ben’s trailer on set had spoiled her, and she was a toddler who now required daily naps.

All of it was fine though, even if she felt both restless and weary at the same time.

She had a trip to look forward to in February and she was going to see her boyfriend and Rey decided without a doubt, that’s what was wrong with her.

She just wasn’t designed to be away from Ben, and with every day she knew it to be more and more true.

She wasn’t however, enjoying feeling pathetic.

She didn’t need rescue, after all, she reminded herself as she put her head down and carried on.

She just needed refreshment.

California never looked so good.
Into the faithful, old VHS player at Resistance she popped Annette Funicello’s *Beach Blanket Bingo* and Sally Field’s *Gidget* and Natalie Wood’s *Rebel Without a Cause* and surrounded herself with sunny, surfing people and a green, hilly landscape behind blue, cresting waves on the TV, swinging palm trees dancing dreamily in the California seabreeze, and she concentrated on willfully smiling as she tried to imagine herself among the sun-worshipping Californians on screen, checking out movie titles to patrons of the store.

She gazed up at the poster of the princess behind the cash register from time to time, considering that her place was here - at the Resistance, and wondered how to reckon it all.

*Was her place here?*

*Was this where she belonged?*

*Was the princess right?*

*If so, why did she feel like this?*

She studied the princess’s steely gaze, her tightly-wound hair, her firm grip on the blaster in her hand, the thin line of her lips and Rey wondered if she was happy.

*Was happiness dependent on location?*

*Purpose?*

*Relationship?*

*Determination?*

*Or something else?*

Finally, finally, pink paper hearts and every variety of pastel candy lined the shelves of every establishment Rey frequented, and February arrived, coating all of the North Shore in an optimistic, Pepto-Bismol shade of romantic love, signaled to Rey it was time to get on a plane and make good on her promise to come to the West Coast.

She hummed *California Dreamin’* by the Mamas and the Papas as she packed her brand new, maroon rolling suitcase, and smiled to herself as she packed a couple lacy, new thongs and her trusty set of flip flops, unused since summer, since Ben Solo had been a famous movie actor on set in a black leather jacket and she’d wilted in the sour heat of a broken heart.

She savored the cool February breeze that shot through the narrow opening between the airplane and the accordion jet bridge, the final wave goodbye from the Tennessee winter to her face as she bit her lip fiercely, narrowed her eyes and raised her chin as she took a decisive final step onto the
humming plane.

“Welcome aboard,” the flight attendants greeted her kindly, as she followed the creeping line of people ahead of her, searching for her mid-cabin, middle-row seat, pulling her small carry-on behind her, the messenger bag holding her phone, passport and a couple magazines across her chest.

She quickly buckled her belt tightly over her hips as she sat and smiled at the middle aged business man beside her at the window while he completely ignored her, his balding head buried in The Chattanooga Times Free Press already, his cologne filling Rey’s head to wooziness with its intensity, the ashy Chattanooga landscape outside the oval window beyond him lazily frowning at the planes full of passengers heading for brighter shores.

She took a deep breath and pulled off her cardigan, shoving it inside her messenger bag and crossed her arms over the bag where it sat on her lap.

Taking the aisle seat beside her, a college-aged student with a blunt haircut and baggy sweats, earbuds in and a pillow stuffed into the overhead bin snuggled deeply into her own seat, apparently prepared to sleep the flight away if her attire and sleepy attitude were any indication, and Rey breathed softly as she relaxed into the knowledge things were settled, these were her seat mates, and she was strapped in for the duration.

Good. She could do this.

*Keep calm and carry on*, she thought.

The flight attendant instructions about emergency landings, floatation devices and illuminating signs however, were all new to Rey.

She couldn’t remember ever hearing anything like those comments on the private jet to Toronto with Ben, and she had been too forlorn when she flew beside Paige on the trip home to Tennessee to have tuned in much, content to follow Paige though all the motions required to get her home.

She realized they were talking about crashing and potentially fucking *dying*, and all of a sudden Rey realized she was on a plane taxiing down a runway, bound for the sky above, feeling trapped.

Panic rose in her throat as a flight attendant leaned over the college student beside her, pointing to the messenger bag on her lap and said to Rey, “Miss, please stow that bag under the seat in front of
you until we are airborne.”

Rey nodded, a lump in her throat as she pushed her bag from her lap, underneath the seat in front of her, nudging it compliantly with her toes, and she swallowed hard as the plane ascended a moment later, chewing her gum hard between her teeth to keep her ears from popping, looking side-to-side to watch from any angle as the landscape below dwindled and the clouds overtook them before they broke the cloud bank and finally emerged into the blue horizon.

Rey sighed aloud in relief, although the airplane’s noise mercifully muffled it completely, and she sank lower into her seat as the people around her pulled out devices and the TV screens illuminated with a sit-com.

Everyone else was calm.

She would be, too.

She pulled her bag back onto her lap and pulled out a *Southern Homes* magazine, the prettiest glossy she could find in the rack as she made her way through the airport, the lushly verdant gardens adorning the farmhouse on the cover beckoning her with the promise of living things as she left the frigid south.

She made her way through the shiny pictures of houses and porches with droopy-eared golden retrievers and tall glasses of lemonade, and sipped her ginger ale as she balanced her bag, her magazine and her drink in her lap as she snuck glances out the windows beyond her now-sleeping seat mates.

Somewhere down there, people were going about their lives, busy and practical and productive.

Tiny cars, tiny structures, tiny bridges and islands and rivers…from way up here, everyone looked like ants, scurrying through life with an agenda and direction.

She watched as cloud cover obscured and then shifted again, removing the veil from beneath the plane, offering another glimpse at humanity way down there on the planet they were winging above, and Rey felt a sharp pang shoot with surgical precision through the center of her thoughts.

Insecurity crept up her spine and took a seat on her right shoulder, cupping a hand to whisper into her ear.

*Abandonment*, it whispered, her oldest enemy and truest companion.

It bloomed hot and dark in the bottom-most cages of her soul as she remembered Finn and Poe would be moving away soon, traveling some winding road to a land she’d never seen before,
somewhere among the anonymous people she was perhaps flying over right now, and they’d be taking their secure friendship and reliability and dependable love with them, all the way to south Texas.

Rey looked down at her hands, studying her trim nails and slim wrists, the *true north* platinum bangle hanging against her arm, hovering over her tattoo, Ben’s first touch of her skin nearly as visibly inked there as the words impressed into her arm and she thought about rescue, about relationship, about resistance.

All her life she had resisted rescue and yet, wrestled with abandonment.

She’d wanted to think herself independent, free, resourceful of her own volition and the truth was, with Finn and Poe leaving she was faced with the ancient, taunting truth…*it’s easier to be independent than unwanted.*

Honesty clawed its way up her throat, scratching it’s nails along her esophagus, burning her with acidic, vitriolic reminders of accusations, *you’re unworthy, you’re disposable, you’re unwanted, you’re doomed to loneliness,* and she felt her stomach lurch as she jumped to her feet, pulling her seatbelt from around her hips as she leapt over her abruptly shocked seat mate, stumbling her way into the aisle and barely bursting through the accordion door to the toilet in time to wretch angrily into the commode.

Her head pounded and her hands shook as she pushed her hair off her forehead when she stood to assess her face in the mirror.

She has slight bags under her eyes, and a thin sheen of sweat from the effort of vomiting, and tears in her eyes which were either from her belly emptying itself or her condemning thoughts or both.

She ran a damp, brown paper towel over her chin and lips, across her cheeks and down the back of her neck, rinsing her mouth with fresh water and taking a deep breath to steady herself.

“Can I get you anything? A drink, or…” the flight attendant just outside the stall asked when she exited, her nausea subsiding as she blanched with embarrassment, realizing half the plane watched her try not to puke in the plane aisle and the other half heard her do so in the bathroom.

“I have one, thanks. I’m fine. Thanks,” she said with a smile, hurrying to her seat and re-buckling her seat belt.

This flight was so much bumpier than the last two she had been on.
Turbulence?

Is that what this was, the constant plane-jostling, her legs bouncing down the aisle towards her seat, feeling they were inside one of three aircraft being cheerily juggled by a celestial, sadistic clown?

Air pocket after air pocket seemed to toss the plane like a dribbled basketball, *up and down, up and down*, until all Rey could do was close her eyes, lean her head against the seat behind her, attempt to stop clenching her jaw so hard and think about other things.

She imagined the open ocean waves, and if she concentrated very hard, she visualized the rocking plane as a drifting ship.

She pictured the ocean, wide and blue, and Ben rowing a boat she could relax inside, steady against the current, and she willed herself to relax her face, forced herself to slow her breathing even if her fists remained white-knuckled around the silver armrests of her seat.

She only had to run to the bathroom one more time to empty her stomach before she watched their approach out the window beyond her balding neighbor’s round head.

Massive hills rimmed the most sprawling metropolis she could have ever imagined, a country unto itself nestled among the broad shoulders of an endless, dusky mountain range, the City of Angels spread out from ridge to shore, worshipping the western sun above.

Somewhere just beyond the Los Angeles Rey could glimpse from her seat was the whole ocean, even bigger and more unreasonably beyond expectations than she could picture.

And she would see it, she was sure - she just *knew* she would see the ocean soon…as soon as she was finished surprising Ben.

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LAX was humongous.

Rey made her way with her rolling suitcase down the jetway and found herself pulled into a living stream of humanity unlike anything she’d ever experienced before.

The concourse was long and expansive, filled with every manner of person Rey could have fathomed, more demographics compiled in one space than a United Colors of Benetton advertisement, and she felt her cheeks bloom with the overwhelmed awareness of her small-town mentality, feeling a bit lost among a shuffling crowd of determined airline passengers who all seemed to know where they belonged.
Pulling herself into a bathroom, she peered at herself in the well-lit mirror again, grateful to have the chance to freshen herself before she went to find Ben.

He had no idea she would be the one doing the surprising this time, no clue, as far as she knew, though she had been texting with Mal for a week, setting her travel plans in motion to arrive an hour before him and meet him in LA before he expected her.

She studied her own eyes as they gazed back at her reflection, sparing a thought as to whether this was a good idea? or an ill-conceived one? and then finally, she smoothed the apples of her cheeks with a sheer balm of cherry-colored cream blush, staining her lips deep pink as well, popping them against one another for good measure and pulling her messenger bag over her shoulder higher as she reentered the fray to find Ben’s gate in a separate terminal.

Two flights of stairs, 3 sets of escalators, 5 lengthy moving sidewalks and a partridge in a pear tree later, Rey planted herself outside the gate awaiting Ben’s flight arrival, the screens overhead promising him momentarily.

Scores of people shuffled around her as she watched the jet bridge door open by an airline employee, planted firmly with fixed eyes and plastered smile, light exuding easily from Rey’s grin for the first time in days as she fought to stand still, ignoring the people hurrying past her in annoyance as she remained stationery.

One by one, passengers disembarked and marched down the narrow passage allotted them between people awaiting their vacated airplane seats and others lounging in plastic chairs bound for other destinations, a steady river of single riders flowing out the door to Rey’s immediate left.

Most had their heads down, studying recently-awakened phones and devices, some already chatting and texting with their people, and she watched with anticipation, barely breathing as she waited for Ben to appear.

His hair was visible first, a shock of smooth black waves rising above a sea of shorter heads, and Rey couldn’t help it, she bounced on the balls of her feet as he approached, head bowed as his hand shuffled through his carryon strapped across his chest, similar to Rey’s, his eyes averted so that he didn’t see her before she reached out and grasped his forearm, gently yanking him backward as his long stride almost carried him right past her.

His sleeves were pushed to his elbows, long shirt tails tucked into his dark jeans and his eyes registered complete shock as Rey beamed at him where she stood, pleasure sweeping into her veins as her heart ignited like a frozen set of gears with the barest touch of his skin under her hand.
In the barest second, his head flew up at the alarming sensation of being grabbed before his eyes met Rey’s and disturbance gave way to awe and joy as he gasped and Rey saw his face flood with stunned adoration.

“Baby!” he breathed, elation shading his face with a bright smile, his arms coming around Rey in a heartbeat as he dragged her up against his chest, crushing her body to his in an immediate response to her nearness.

Rey laughed and squealed in delight as Ben kissed her hard, feeling his happiness wind around them like his arms, both at having shocked him, her surprise a success, and at the thrill of being made whole the second he embraced her, her heart resettling, her mind recentering, her stomach relaxing, her eyes welling with tears of relief.

“I got you this time,” she giggled triumphantly as he assaulted her face with kisses, burying his face in her neck as he breathed her in, her feet dangling as he held her aloft like the first time he’d come to find her at Resistance after his DUI in late November. “I finally surprised you!” she said with a glowing face, satisfied in her success.

Ben was almost too surprised to speak, his language limited to sputterings of “how did you?” and “when did you?” and “are you really here?” reminding Rey of each time she had been the one nearly unable to process the bewilderment of Ben’s presence as he shockingly entered her world.

She felt high as a firework on the 4th of July and bursting with as much energy as she grinned up at him while he cradled her face in his hands, depositing her back to the floor.

“You’re here,” he said, looking down at her, still smiling and shaking his head in disbelief at her. “You came.”

“I couldn’t wait another single minute to be with you,” she said truthfully, happy to receive another kiss from his beautiful lips, winding her hands into the hair at the nape of his neck, kissing him back until all the passengers had deplaned and they were left standing in a sea of drifting people, no further boarding process happening at the gate.

Rey looked around and chuckled again, realizing they’d likely given everyone a good show and she couldn’t find any fucks to give, frankly, just way too happy to feel her hand laced with Ben’s as he led the way, their suitcases trailing them in unison as they made their way out of the airport together, towards the cool California air that waited beyond.
They had an hour in the backseat of the car together, heading for Ben’s condo in the Hollywood Hills, Mal told them once he had deposited their luggage in the trunk deftly, Ben shielding them both from the paparazzi efficiently if more kindly than Rey would have, if alone.

*Ben, where you heading now?*

*Are you home for a while now, Ben?*

*You and your lady love gonna be shacking up for a while, Ben?*

*Rey, are you moving in?*

*Welcome home, Ben, tell us about your project!*

*Ben, give us a smile!*

*Rey, tell us how you like California!*

*Hey, give us a kiss, show us a little kiss!*

*Ben, give her a kiss!*

Rey had propped her oversized shades onto her nose as they descended the escalator hand in hand, following Ben’s lead as he anticipated the small group of photographers who inhabited the LAX arrivals and departures sidewalk space like vultures circling carrion, and she held her breath while he led her through the parted crowd towards Mal’s car waiting them on the curb.

She’d never been happier to see the tattooed lumberjack angel, who now looked more like a menacing pilot than a comforting bodyguard in his faded, brown leather bomber jacket and aviator shades, silently closing the door Ben and Rey climbed through and ignoring the paps who scampered close to the door he slammed while he went around to the driver’s side.

Ben gave a slight, one-handed wave through the window beside himself while looking the other way at Rey, who tilted her hand over her face and tried to avoid the glare of the bulbs as they flashed, leaning into Ben’s side as he wrapped an arm around her.

Leaving the airport roads and finding themselves on the serpentine, complex highways of Los Angeles, Rey breathed deeply and rested her head back against Ben’s shoulder as she watched the city fly past them, amazed at the incredible speed at which every vehicle seemed to move around one another.

The congested, throbbing LA traffic made even the busiest Chattanooga roadways look like lazy country lanes.
Ben pointed out landmarks as they drove, noting for Rey when they passed Rodeo Drive, Paramount Studios and the Hollywood Walk of Fame stars which fanned out from Ben’s neighborhood like a personal red carpet.

It was all absolutely surreal.

The very best parts of the tour though, were when Ben stopped narrating and Rey leaned her head back against his bicep, tilted her chin up towards his face and he wordlessly leaned down to press his beautiful, plush lips to hers over and over, and whispered he loves her, he’s missed her, he wants her so badly.

Mal tuned them out completely, his Apple airpods snugly inside his ears drowning out their sweet nothings.

Rey leaned on her tiptoes to hug Mal in gratitude once they were deposited inside the parking garage of Ben’s building, and he stiffened only slightly before patting her roughly and nodding once.

“Thanks, Mal,” she said with a grin and a wink, still happy they’d taken Ben by storm as she’d planned.

For some reason, as she’d planned this trip with Malaak’s help, Rey had found it incredibly important to convey in her arrival to Ben exactly how much she meant to make good on her word, that she would leave her world and come find him inside his own universe, try to picture herself there with him and treat him as he treated her: as essential.

She wanted so much for him to know how she adored him.

Hopefully, this was another way to show him.

So far, even though it all felt completely foreign and somewhat like an unbelievable dream, Rey had solid, unmoving ground under her feet again and she was feeling like herself while she stood beside Ben.

Location didn’t actually matter, she realized, looking up at Ben’s strong, familiar face in the darkened garage, street noise in the distance, the February breeze sliding around them where they stood, and it dawned on Rey it didn’t matter whether they were together in the North Shore or Toronto or Los Angeles.
What mattered was they were together.

“You two make a decent undercover team,” Ben says, teasing them both. “You got me,” he admitted.

“See ya later, lover boy,” Malaak said with a smirk at his boss, pulling his aviators back down over his eyes and turning to leave in the car.

Ben wasted no time in leading Rey to the glass doors which led into the tall structure, his condo a few floors above, the promise of a space where they could collapse side by side on a stationery surface giving Rey the strength she needed to accompany him.

She hitched her bag up once more, taking Ben’s hand but, he paused to take her bag from over her shoulder and looped it atop his own bag across his chest, and kissed her knuckles as he took her hand again.

Seven flights of stairs later, Rey huffed exhaustedly as she slumped beside Ben’s front door as he fished his keys from his front jeans pocket.

“Next time we take the elevator,” he said, looking at her from a side-angle while he struggled to unlock the door. “I’m used to the stairs to avoid people. And just, ya know, get in some extra fitness but…I’m sorry baby doll. I wasn’t thinking,” he says, taking in Rey’s slightly pale face as she recovered from the climb.

“I’m fine,” she smiled weakly, “it’s fine, Ben. Seriously,” she says, patting his hand where she still held it. “It was just a long flight, you know? Eight hours. And I’m all screwed up with the time change,” she said, trying to make out what time it even was right now.

The sunshine that poured through his wall of windows once they stepped inside would have made her believe it was somewhere around 4 or 5 pm but, she was 5 hours ahead which meant it was bedtime on the North Shore.

Suddenly, she felt exhausted.

She followed Ben around his home with a smile, squeezing his hand and feeling her heart thump hard when she realized he was shy, and proud, and nervous to show her his home.

It was a bachelor pad for sure, sleek lines and white and black furniture, glass sliders leading to the
small deck overlooking the neighboring buildings, a rowing machine on the floor where a dining room table obviously was meant to live, not a single plant in the whole space, scripts piled beside a massive sectional couch.

The whole space screamed manliness and Rey fell in love with it instantly, every corner shouting Ben’s presence. She wanted to curl up in every cranny and cuddle the whole apartment in its entirety, it was so freaking deliciously Ben.

With a powerful yawn, her hand flew to her mouth as she realized she was incredibly tired all of a sudden, the adrenaline and travel weariness catching up to her and Ben pulled her into a hug where they stood together in his kitchen, where he’d been showing Rey the kettle’s location in case she got the urge to make some tea.

He planted a kiss in her hair. “C’mere, baby doll,” he said, leading her by the hand into the bedroom.

A handsome king size bed, dove grey and white pillows piled deeply against the familiar upholstered headboard she knew by heart, the backdrop for many late night FaceTime dates, called her name almost audibly as Ben led her to sit on the edge.

With firm hands, he pulled her boots off, kneeling before her as she sat.

While she stifled another yawn and smiled at him, he tugged her jeans off and leaned into her to tickle her, playfully growling as he nuzzled her belly with his head before grinning up at her and pulling her long-sleeve shirt over her head. With a helpless, sated smile, seated only in panties and a bra in her boyfriend’s condo, on his massive, feather-soft bed, she gazed at him, feeling a little punch-drunk.

“Lay back,” he said, and she moaned as she obeyed, feeling him lift her ankles and lead her legs under the cold covers, surely professionally tucked, and she blinked heavily as she watched him walk around the bed towards the large glass window sliding doors, closing the sheers and then the drapes, darkening the room instantly.

Rey’s eyes drooped as night fell in a heartbeat.

“I want you with me,” she crooned, nearly whining, “come to bed,” she murmured, tugging his sleeve poutily as he sat beside her on the edge of the bed, still completely clothed.

“I’m just gonna order some dinner,” he said. “I know you. You’re going to be ravenous at some
point, once you get some rest,” he said. “Go to sleep and when you wake up, I’ll be here.”

“I don’t wanna be alone, I want to be with you,” she said around another deep yawn, her eyes closing despite herself, tiredness winning out no matter how she fought.

“Goddamn, I’ve wanted to see you in my bed,” he said, looking at her, ignoring her pleas for him to join her. “I missed you so much, Rey,” he said, squeezing her thigh under her blankets and kissing her as he leaned close.

“Come be with me,” she whined gently before yawning again, reaching up to trace his jaw with her fingertips. “I need you.”

She’d missed him so much, she didn’t want to waste any time sleeping when she could be soaking him up.

“I’ll get some food for when we wake up later and I’ll climb in bed to nap with you,” he said against her mouth, kissing her again before moving towards the door.

“I love you,” she murmured as she drifted. “I love you, Ben,” she vaguely sent in his direction as she curled down into the pillows.

She knew he loved her.

She didn’t need to stay awake to hear it again.

He’d told her to go to sleep, he’d put her in his bed and he’d looked happy about it.

No need to tell her twice.

************

When she woke, sunlight was streaming new and audacious through the part in the curtains into Ben’s room, and Rey smiled as she stretched out hungrily, reaching with every inch of her limbs for every corner of the bed.

Behind her, Ben inhaled deeply as she felt him respond in kind, waking and stretching his body slightly, pulling Rey’s middle to himself tighter, nuzzling her neck with his face, his favorite position in bed being the one in which they found themselves this morning, the one which made Rey the little spoon.
It was bright and she was happy and California lay outside the windows and she was with her man and… wait, it was bright? Wasn’t it evening?

Rey startled slightly, moving to prop up in bed and twisted to see Ben behind her, his bare chest and arms wrapped around her firmly, his eyes still closed as she turned to see him.

“Ben,” she whispered, turning over to curl herself around him where he lay, his eyes still closed against the pillow beneath his head. “What time is it?”

“It’s morning, beautiful,” he said in a rough voice, his mouth muffled by the pillow. “You slept all night, baby doll. You needed it.”

“No!” Rey said, disappointed she’d missed so many hours of waking time. “I didn’t mean to sleep that long!”

“S’okay,” he said, trading positions with her and pulling her to his chest as he rolled to his back. “You were tired, baby. I’m glad you slept.”

Ben pushed her hair back while Rey grazed his pecs with her fingertips as her eyelashes brushed his skin as she blinked, taking in everything she could see of his house from this spot as she listened to his heart, steady and strong under her ear. Finally, she moved to the bathroom to give her bladder a break and Ben went to make coffee and a cup of tea for her after kissing her and patting her bottom when she climbed out of bed.

She curled right back down into the perfect worn nest of their shared sleep space when she returned and grinned at him when he approached with her mug of tea, beaming at his beautiful self as he served her in bed.

What have I done to be this lucky? she thought, watching him walk towards her.

“Oh my God, I love you so much,” she said and she took the tea in both hands and pulled her knees to her chest as she sat up a bit. She was still wearing a padded but lacy bra and matching bikini bottoms but, nothing more and she shivered a little as she bared her shoulders in the February morning. “Thank you,” she enthused.

Ben was still standing above her, beside her side of his bed, his coffee in his hands, clad only in
boxer briefs and an unreadable look in his eyes.

Rey blinked up at him while she took a sip of her tea, carefully using both hands to bring the steaming goodness to her lips.

“What?” she asked as he looked down at her, watching her carefully.

Her eyes darted side to side.

“Do I have something on my face?” she asked nervously, self-conscious.

Ben’s lips pulled into a half-smile and he placed his coffee on the bedside table beside her. He sat down on the bed and pushed his hair back with one palm, running his hand through his hair before speaking.

“I’ve sat right there so many times and called you. Right in that very spot. I’ve sat there and waited for you to answer and I’ve wished you were in this bed with me. And now you are.”

“And now I am,” Rey replied happily, taking another sip and smiling at him happily.

“And now you are,” he repeated, and added, “finally.”

Without another word, he leaned over and opened the bedside table drawer beneath his ignored coffee mug and pulled out a small velvet box.

He slipped to his knees, both of them, in his underwear, right on the floor beside Rey where she sat propped in his bed drinking tea and he flipped open the box to reveal a shimmering square diamond flanked by smaller twinkling gems, a shining star of a ring set against an ink black tuft of velvet and Rey’s eyes flew open as her breath escaped her lungs.

“Rey,” he began, looking at her with such tender trepidation her eyes filled with tears, even as her hands remained frozen around her mug, hovering above her lap. “I can’t wait. I should wait - I should do this a whole hell of a lot better than I am about to but, I can’t fucking wait anymore,” he said, looking at her.
“I love you,” he said, “I love you so much,” he said, Rey’s tears almost blurring her vision as they welled heavily in her eyes. “Rey Lowood...” he began, stopping to gulp and breathe, almost losing his chance to continue as Rey struggled, nearly unable to bear the anticipation, too anxious to call him her own, too anxious to claim him, too anxious to tell him yes.

“Please,” he said. “Please marry me.”

“Yes!” she shouted, the tears spilling over her lower lashes.

“Yes! Oh my God, yes!” she must have replied a thousand times, pulling him up by the face to kiss him, throwing her mug onto the table as he placed the ring with shaking hands on her left ring finger, almost too big but, close enough, and she gaped at its beauty as she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him flat against her, snuggling them both down flat on the bed, nestling him between her legs and wrapping herself tightly around him, giggling with breathless glee.

“You’ll marry me? You really will?” he asked, pulling back to look at her face, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and balancing on elbows around her frame. “Mrs. Solo? You’re gonna marry me? Promise you will? You promise?”

“I fucking promise,” she growled as she lifted her head, kissing him hard, biting his juicy bottom lip, remembering she had slept beside him for many hours but had yet to feel his body against hers. “I love you so much, Ben Solo. You’re the only man I’ve ever loved. The only man I ever will love. I cannot wait to marry you.”

There was no coming back from this one-way street of kissing towards anything fruitful until they had consummated this decision and within moments, that much was clear.

“Let me get naked for you,” she said, still finding her voice and catching her breath, reaching behind to unclasp her bra, her ring catching the light as she flung her bra off her body. She held the ring up to flex the facets against the sunlight and bit her lip. “It’s so beautiful, Ben,” she said, appreciatively, “I can’t believe you want me to have it. I can’t believe you want me to wear it and you want me to marry you.”

“Rey, I want to marry you even more than I want you to let me take these pretty goddamn panties off you and I want to take them off you very fucking badly,” he said as she laughed at him and raised her hips, allowing him to free her of her last clothing.

As soon as she was bare under him, his mouth was against her wet center, his tongue fucking her as his hands roamed her breasts, Rey’s back arching as he unwound all her worries, all her loneliness,
all her sadness like unwrapping grave clothes from her reborn form.

“God, this sweet pussy,” he murmured against her dripping skin. “I can’t believe you’re mine, baby. All mine.”

“I’m yours, and you are mine,” she said, giving his hair a tug for emphasis, twining her fingers in the tresses.

“Come up here,” she managed to gasp out after a few minutes, unwilling to come around anything other than his whole self deep inside her, “come up here, give me your mouth, Ben,” she said, reaching for him and moving under him until she felt him nudge the entrance with his hard cock, their arms wrapped around one another tightly, his mouth devouring her and taking the air from her as he breathed her in. Ben filling her was always special, it was always luscious and groan-worthy and beyond description and supernaturally good…but, Ben making love to her after giving her his heart, giving her a family…it was beyond description.

It was sublime.

There was not enough time today to thrust her hips to meet his to adequately tell him how incomparable his love was, how delicious his body tasted, how magnificent his cock was as it split her to the seams.

There were not enough words to tell him today how deeply she loved him, wanted to surrender to him, body and soul and spirit, how devastatingly entranced she was by his walk, his voice, his touch, his movements, all completely man.

There was not enough space to use to convey the depth and width and height of her devotion to him, her absolute and complete commitment to him, her wholehearted and passionate desire for him, for his body, for his mind, for his essence.

There would never be more than her one, little life to give him, just this one little lifetime and the days she had left to lead it but, she offered it to him wholly, each press of her lips to his a vow, each trail of her fingers down his back as she drew him closer a promise, each touch of their bodies a guarantee.

“Let me take you in my mouth,” she whispered, “please, Ben,” she begged, desperate and grateful when he pulled from her and knelt over her mouth to let her pull him close, take him deep, swallow what he gave to her, a drink offering sweeter than wine. She relished the cool metal of her ring as she felt it slide against her other fingers and she dug her nails into his skin gently as she moaned in rapture.
Mine, she thought greedily, gazing up at him while he looked at her worshipfully below him.

“Baby doll, you’re so fucking beautiful,” he said, groaning. “I don’t wanna come in your mouth. Rey, let me come in your beautiful body. Come here,” he said, pulling her to her knees, wrapping his hands around her hips and entering her firmly, his hands coming around her. “Wife,” he said, “you belong to me,” every thrust an exclamation mark, every press of his hips against her emphatic. “Say it, baby. Say you’re mine. Tell me,” he begged.

“Forever, Ben. I’m yours forever and you are mine,” she said as she leaned back to meet his chest with her back, wrapping her arm behind his neck behind her, feeling him pummel her with himself, spending his energy inside her with the force of a hurricane.

“Come for me, baby doll,” he said, his fingers bringing her to climax as she held her breath and reached higher with him, her eyes slammed shut as he thrust himself behind her, “give this to me first, baby.”

Rey toppled to the bed in a heap of satisfied woman as Ben curled over her back and tangled his hands in her hair, pulling her head up taut as he kissed the side of her neck and came inside her with a grunt, both of them falling exhausted to the bed with a satisfied smile. They laid together at the foot of the bed, somehow having ended up there in the midst of all the climbing all over one another, and the excitement of becoming engaged and they laid, each on their sides, staring into one another’s eyes as they regained consciousness and their breathing stabilized.

Ben held up a hand and Rey held hers, palm to palm against his, their fingers lacing, Rey’s diamond ring smiling at her. She bit her lip as she watched it glimmer at her cheerfully and she leaned over to kiss Ben as he watched her delight in her ring.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“I would buy you a million rings if it meant you would say yes, baby,” he said.

Yesterday, she’d flown on a plane from Tennessee, a ball of nerves, singular and anxious. Today was only a few hours old but already, she faced it feeling secure and armed.

Miraculous.
“You need some food,” he mentioned, as he climbed on top of her once more, half-hard against her leg again. “You haven’t eaten in a really long time. Since yesterday. And I plan to fuck you in every room in this place. I want the memory of your face while I deflower you against every surface I can have you on around here.”

**********

In the movies, Los Angeles tends to be a breezy, neon-colored paradise, the land of swimming pools and palm trees, glamour and beauty, beachy innocence and breathtaking vistas.

In reality, Rey realized it was peopled with normal, everyday humans who left chewing gum underneath diner tables, graffiti around the Walk of Fame stars on the sidewalks and flyers for free talent showcases stapled to every surface that didn’t move.

In the movies, Los Angeles was bright and warm, a sunshine-dappled land filled with gorgeous people and movie stars, legends and heroes and a sign with letters 45-feet tall, visible from anywhere you were, an emblem of determination and talent.

In reality, the Hollywood sign was visible in the distance but, dwarfed by the massive mountains that flanked it, looming like a man-made addition to an incredible set of green hills, more a symbol of the human carbon footprint on organic beauty than anything to do with the scores of people who worked blue-collar jobs while hoping to break into show business.

In the movies, Los Angeles had it all: picturesque overlooks, quaint neighborhoods, movie studios and beach bums and so far, all Rey had seen outside of the car was the inside of Ben’s apartment, a yummy local place for brunch, which did have incredible Eggs Benedict fairly swimming in homemade hollandaise sauce, to be fair, and the parking lot outside his building so, when Ben asked if she wanted to take a drive and see some sights, Rey jumped at the chance.

She should not have been surprised Ben led her to the garage below his condo and towards a cherry red Porsche 911 convertible but, somehow his vehicle had never come up in conversation, likely because Rey didn’t drive and she rolled her eyes dramatically when he opened the door for her to climb in.

“What?” he asked, defensively, a smile playing on his lips.
Rey just raised one eyebrow at him as she climbed in and he kept on hand on the door as he shrugged and told her, “only girl I ever loved before you, baby,” with a wink before closing her door and fairly strutting around to his own side.

If she hadn’t been ready to screw him before, she was after watching Ben Solo navigate a 5-speed through a city and into the Pacific Palisades behind sunglasses. With the windows down and the cool ocean breeze floating through the car, Ben’s hands deftly trading the wheel, the gear shift and Rey’s knee, his attention focused as he drove them towards an unknown destination, Rey felt totally mesmerized by his masculine aura.

Something about seeing his hands curled around the car, moving them swiftly and authoritatively around town, his beautiful hands pulling and pushing the wheel and gear shift confidently, his eyes, normally so available to her hidden and inaccessible to her as he faced forward, the hint of a smug grin on his face as he felt her watch him made her heart melt into a pool of fascinated lust.

“You are such a stud,” she announced with a sigh, running a hand into his hair.

Ben shot her a grin and a wink, sending butterflies floating in her belly.

The city fell away as they climbed further, the twisting roadways above the grided, deadlocked roads below giving way to towering greenery, wider, quieter roads trimmed with mailboxes.

“Look,” Ben instructed, his chin pointing past his shoulder towards the west, beyond the trees and Rey glimpsed a shock of azure blue filter through the green boughs, the Pacific spreading out beyond the borders of the city that lay below like an immense nirvana of water, a never-ending well of deep sea depths.

“Woah,” she couldn’t help but breathe.

Rey knew on some level she sounded like a child, even to her own ears but, she was incapable of forming more coherent thought. It was incredible. She had no idea how to even comprehend so much blue.

Ben grinned at her and squeezed her knee, clearly amused.

“Come on,” he said as he parked in front of a home after turning off a street in the hills above Los Angeles. “I wanna show you something,” he said.
Rey climbed out of the car and stepped away to meet him, taking his hand and breathing in the fresh scent all around. It smelled like woods after rain, like salt and rosewood, the aroma of invitation.

Ben opened a latch on a face gate and stepped through, leading Rey before reattaching the gate and Rey realized they were walking through someone’s yard. Her feet stilled as she pulled Ben to a stop.

“Ben,” she hissed, “we can’t go traipsing through someone’s yard! What are we doing right now?”

“C’mon, we’re almost there,” he grinned as he insisted and he tugged her further, bringing them fully into the backyard.

Rey worried and furrowed her brow, wondering how they’d explain this trespassing to the homeowner as she glanced nervously at the back of the house, now completely surrounded by someone else’s property and she only felt her mind dislodge from concern when Ben came to a halt and she looked around.

Behind them lay a ranch-style house, the swimming pool housed in smooth, natural stone a scattering of cabana chairs facing the deck the stood on, while around them sat a comfortable collection of couches and chairs made for enjoying the view amidst creature comforts.

Because the view…the view was utterly spectacular.

Beyond the deck Rey found herself standing atop with Ben lay a panorama of lush, green mountains to either side, opening at the mouth to the glory of a vast Pacific Ocean below, 180 degrees of fresh, bountiful nature.

This mountain home overlooked the water.

“It’s stunning,” Rey said.

“I think so, too,” Ben agreed, taking it all in beside her. He moved to wrap an arm around her shoulders and took her left hand, newly minted with a diamond ring and kissed it while squeezing her into his side and looking down at her.
“Uh, whose house is this? Where are we?” Rey was asking as she heard a voice. She turned to see a lithe woman in a flowy, raw silk dress, lavender waves held back in an intricate design and a thick pendant swinging from her neck with every step.

The woman clasped her hands as introduced herself as she walked close to Ben and Rey.

“Oh my God, oh my God, look at you,” she said, bringing her hands to her chest and tilting her head to the side as she studied Rey. “Honey, you just couldn’t be any lovelier,” she said, emotions evident in her tone.

She turned to Ben and hugged him tightly as Ben informed Rey, “baby, this is my Aunt Ami. My godmother. My mother’s best friend since college.”

Lightbulbs illuminated for Rey as she made the connection and smiled brightly, no longer as confused. “Oh! Well, hello, I’m so sorry! It’s so nice to meet you! You have a lovely home here!”

Amilyn smiled and looked at Ben, then back at Rey, then back at Ben before patting Rey’s arm.

“Oh, it’s not my house, my dear,” she said with a sly smile, before adding to Ben, “I’ll be home if you want to come by or call me later,” and reaching to hug him again.

“So wonderful to finally meet you, my love,” Amilyn said with another hug for Rey before leaving the way she came, her presence and absence both leaving Rey confused.

Rey looked up at Ben quizzically and wondered what to ask him first - why was Ben’s godmother here or where were they?

“It’s not her house,” Ben said as he took Rey’s hands in his. “I’m wondering if you want it to be ours.”

“Ours…” Rey repeated, trying to understand. “Ours like…like yours and mine? Together? Ours?”

“Yeah,” Ben laughed. “I mean, we are getting married and I do want to fucking live with my wife. I thought…I thought maybe you might like this? Obviously we need to go inside and see the rest but we can always fix anything in there. Aunt Ami sent me videos walking through it already and…I just…I wanted you to see this view, first. The mountains, the ocean. I thought…” Ben
trailed off as Rey felt the air thin and her world tilt and shift, everything start to spin.

Marrying Ben meant living together.

Ben lived in California and nowhere near the North Shore.

Why hadn’t she thought harder about that?

It wouldn’t have meant she would have ever in a billion years answered differently but, she hadn’t known when she answered she was automatically agreeing to move sight-unseen across the country, either.

“Baby,” Ben said, “are you okay? Come here, sit down,” he said, leading her to a chair on the deck.

Rey brought a hand to her forehead and tried to fight back the surge of uncertainty that rose in her stomach, threatening to knock her off-kilter again.

A wave moved her seat as she sat still on it, a minor earthquake tremor rocked the Earth’s crust below them and it lifted Rey’s chair, gently rolling underneath, the effect like a docked boat on a choppy lake widening her eyes with fear.

“What was that?” Rey asked in terror, gripping her chair and Ben’s hand.


“No biggie’ like really no biggie? Or ‘no biggie’ like that was an actual earthquake?” Rey asked.

Ben thought a moment.

“Both?”

Rey put her head into her hands and moaned softly.

“No, no, Ben, no,” Rey said, catching his hands. “This is…this is magnificent. Gorgeous. Look at it! Unbelievably pretty. Incredibly expensive, I’m pretty sure,” she said looking around and thinking practically, “and all happening fast today but of course I love it. I love it. Ben, listen to me, I love it. And I love you. More than anything. Okay? This is just so much to process.”

“I know, I know,” he said, beginning to beat himself up, the thread unraveling for him right before Rey’s eyes. “I bought the ring as soon as you left Toronto and I got my Aunt Ami to get an appointment with this listing because she’s a Realtor and I just couldn’t wait another minute to share it all with you. I’m…I’m sorry. God, I’m pressuring you. I’m sorry,” he said, slumping into a seat beside Rey.

It was all happening so fast.

And yet…not.

Rey loves Ben.

Ben lives in California.

Rey wants to live with Ben.

Rey should move to California.

Right?

She studies the calm blue water far beyond the circle of green mountain space encompassing them on the outdoor veranda where they sit and lets her eyes wander the shoreline, the waves, and the quiet calm out in the deeper depths.

She knows the pounding surf is much harder for anyone actually inside it right now, struggling against the powerful current.

She knows the waves fall hard, the white froth at the top speak of power, of threats and danger but, from up here there is an endless stretch of calm not visible to anyone in the crash of the surf.

Rey sees her future in that moment spread out among the infinite beauty of the boundless water way out there, possibilities and love stretching and flowing further than she can see and only from this vantage point, this birds’ eye view can she see the potential bliss of a glassy sea beyond the trauma of the surf.

These changes are hard.
People are moving, dynamics are shifting - Finn and Poe and even herself - some of them will feel like crashing surf, threatening to pull her under but, beyond she realizes a limitless wilderness of hope and Rey can see it all from here where she sits on someone else’s deck.

“I love you so much,” Rey says with a renewed smile on her face, looking at Ben and at his hand that holds hers as they look to one another. “You did all that for us to be together. For me. You’re amazing.”

“I just want to make you happy,” he said, looking a bit powerless, “I love you, baby.”

Rey stood and offered him a hand. “Let’s go see the inside of our house,” she said, and watched his face light up.

She would definitely never tire of seeing his face shine at her like that.

Ben moved to kiss her and swung her around so her feet flew away from her body as they turned circles on the porch overlooking the scenic overlook.

Just like in the movies.

Then, they walked together towards a home surrounded by hills, just like Rey was used to seeing in Tennessee, a home bordering the ocean just like Ben was used to seeing in Manhattan and Los Angeles and they only had to walk inside twice: once when they held hands and once when Ben gasped and grabbed Rey around the waist, hauling her up onto his hip and taking her back out again in order to sweep her into his arms bridal style and carry her over the threshold like the Disney prince he was.

**********

“I’m sorry, Aunt Ami, I have to get this,” Rey heard Ben say as he chatted with his aunt about real estate deals and dotted lines and escrow later that night before dinner. Rey stood pouring Perrier into glasses and prepping take-out onto ceramic dishes to eat on the porch of Ben’s condo when she heard him take a second, decidedly less pleasant call.

_Hux_? she thought, dismissing it, knowing Ben was willing to give as good as he got versus Hux, at least.

_Leia_? she wondered, deciding against it, realizing he was not sharing the news of their engagement or their home purchase.
Ben marched into the kitchen a couple moments later, riled up and stormy, pushing his hands through his hair and doing a good impression of an angry man although how could that be after the day they’d had, dreamy as it was?

Rey raised her eyebrows and Ben groaned and kicked at a cabinet in frustration.

“Snoke,” he spat in disgust. “Snoke is pissed. My ‘presence is demanded’ . Tomorrow. Early.”

“About what?” Rey asked.

“Who fucking knows?” Ben moaned, rolling his head on his neck. “It’s always something. So fucking sick of it.”

Rey nodded and handed him a glass of water. “Okay,” she said. “Well, we’ll just go together.”

Ben looked at her after he took a drink.

“Really? You really want to do that? You’d go with me? Snoke is kind of a monster, baby, you know that. Right?”

Rey smiled. “Would you let a monster hurt me?”

“Fuck no,” he said with vengeance. “Of course not!”

“Well,” she said with an easy confidence, “I’ll protect you and you protect me. We’ll be fine as long as we have each other.”

“I fucking love you, you know that?” he said, pulling her head under his chin and then tilting her chin to kiss her lips.

Rey planted her chin against his sternum and grinned up at him, fisting her hand and showing him her diamond ring where it sat on her left hand, tucked between her knuckles.
“You and me,” she said as he laced his hands behind the small of her back. “We got this.”

“You and me, baby doll,” he said as he kissed her nose. “Where are those burgers?” he asked.

“These better live up to the hype,” Rey warned, “I’m pretty sick of hearing about these things and I'm starving,” she teased.

Ben opened the sliding glass doors and the cool California night wafted inside, Rey curling up on Ben’s massive couch beside him instead of on a deck, happily gorging on a burger as she took breaks to admire her sparkly ring catching the last sparks of light off the fading sunlight.

Nighttime was settling in and her first day of California life had gone exceedingly well. She’d gotten engaged to the love of her life. They were buying an incredible house. And, she’d survived an honest-to-God earthquake.

Surely, after another good night’s rest there would be nothing but good, hopefully less eventful things to come tomorrow.

Surely.

***************

Chapter End Notes

PHOTOS of THIS chapter's locations on my tumblr here: https://strawberrycupcakehuckleberrypie.tumblr.com

Love you, Reader!
Reckoning

Chapter Notes

WARNING: if you can't handle a character tossing their cookies (or: emetophobia) - do not continue reading.

Additional trigger warning: Snoke aludes to violence. No one in this chapter or this fic at large suffers violence but, it IS insinuated. *** If you could be triggered by the mention of violence against women, DO NOT READ FURTHER. ***

Final warning: I went for broke. All cards I have held close to the chest are now on the table.
Some of you will have strong feelings about this.
As a survivor, I welcome the conversation.

We all knew Snoke was going to be awful.

Moodboard by my darling sis @rileybabe
Beta'd by my sweet sister @uselessenglishmajor
xo
Berry
CHAPTER 18: RECKONING

THE NORTH SEA

There is a time of reckoning in all our lives.

“There is a time of reckoning”
It wouldn’t have mattered to Rey if Ben had described his boss more completely in the past, or if she had ever Googled the studio head to familiarize herself with what to expect before they walked into Snoke’s office.

Really, nothing could have prepared her for the oppressively humid scent of hothouse rose blooms, the impressive collection of carefully-curated furniture more befitting tea time at the Plaza Hotel in New York City than a motion picture studio head’s office in Los Angeles, or the unmistakable sense of inadequacy that enveloped her as she stepped into Snoke’s office a step behind Ben, their steps swallowed by the thick rug.

The large, white leather swivel chair was pointing away from them as Snoke stared out the tall windows facing the lot while the conversation on the phone beyond them filled the room with tension before they were even seated, and Rey shot a look at Ben to confirm they should go ahead and take the two seats opposite the huge, glossy white desk before them, a ledger and pen centered between a framed photo of Snoke holding a rifle while standing over a dead rhinoceros on one side and a large silver vase of pink blooms on the other.

“Get Terrance Bechtel on the project or I walk. I want him,” Snoke was saying in a smoothly threatening voice. “There is no other option. I will accept no other offering, and if it doesn’t happen very soon I will be unhappy. You don’t want me to be unhappy, do you?”

It sounded more like a statement than a question.

“Would you like to see me unhappy?” The question hung in the air as Snoke awaited a response.

Rey heard the glossy clock sitting between two upholstered chairs nearest the window tick patiently, the ornate trim on the antique showcasing the Victorian era dancers raised in ceramic at the edges of the golden clock face demanding her gaze at its beauty even as her stomach roiled uncomfortably hearing the anger echoing from the phone conversation beyond them.

“Then do it,” Snoke said, an even tone barely masking a quietly simmering rage.

There was no way to know what that had been about and no way to construe it as anything but threatening.
Ben shot Rey a small smile and wiped his hands on his thighs, too far away from Rey’s chair to touch her and a cold chill crept up Rey’s back as she realized that was by design.

Whomever entered this room was intended to face their fate singularly.

The large leather chair swiveled to face Rey and Ben and Gemma Snoke peered at them in all her powerful, studio head glory.

Her long, sharply-filed nails laced together underneath her chin as her palms met, her blazing blue eyes set below blunt-chopped, ash blonde waves swept past ears studded with huge, blinding diamonds. Her white silk blouse billowed tastefully around her slim frame but, her frosted lips indicated a lifetime spent smoking cigarettes, the creases around her mouth deep and unmistakable though her perfect teeth rivaled her blouse for whiteness.

“Ah,” she said, a wide smile cracking her face in a way that reminded Rey of pain. “Solo. And you’ve brought a little friend along with you. Charming,” she said as she came around the desk towards them.

The unmistakable Louboutins she wore gave her at least an additional five inches in height and the severe cut of her navy pencil skirt, ending well above her knees slid even higher when she leaned back against the edge of the desk mere inches from both sets of their knees. Rey didn’t miss it that Snoke failed to offer a hand in greeting, nor that she referred to Rey as Ben’s “friend” which felt intentional to say the least.

Snoke peered down and gave Rey an obvious once-over, sweeping a gaze head-to-toe where Rey sat in a low-backed chair in front of the desk, her expression witheringly unimpressed before turning her attention to Ben. Rey blushed instinctively, conscious of her jeans and long-sleeved peplum shirt, her small cross body purse strapped around her middle, her Doc Martens laced to mid-calf.

She wiggled the new diamond ring on her left hand nervously and gulped slightly.

“You wanted to see me?” Ben asked, the nerves beneath his voice not even slightly concealed to Rey.

“Oh my, yes. I did. I didn’t know you’d be bringing…company, ” she paused for effect, “with you to a business meeting but…” she trailed, eyeing Rey openly once again before looking back to Ben, “I really couldn’t care less.”
“Well, I’m happy to come in and hear whatever this is about, I want it dealt with,” Ben said with a sigh, conveying near-boredom, an obvious attempt at bravado even to Rey who sensed Snoke’s control entirely over this discussion. “I am technically on vacation you know. Got the film wrapped, in the can, all ready for editing. I actually think you’ll be pleased with it. But, I know you wanted to see me. So…here I am.”

Snoke smiled toothlessly, her lacquered lips pulled tightly over her mouth.

“Here you are.”

“Here I am,” Ben repeated.

Snoke took a deep breath and moved closer to Ben’s knees.

“Anything else you’d like to educate me about before we get started then? Hmm?”

Ben swallowed and shot a look at Rey beside him, and then shook his head. “No.”

“Fabulous,” Snoke said, moving around the edge of the desk to take her seat again in her leather throne behind the desk. Rey felt her shoulders release slightly with every inch gained in freedom from the overpowering woman.

“Let me ask you something,” Snoke began. “How do you feel your time in Canada filming the indy went?”

Ben hesitated but, answered after a moment, thoughtfully. “I think it went well. Very well, in fact. I think it was a great shoot.”

“You do,” Snoke confirmed, twisting her chair side-to-side slowly. “And you feel the overall experience was a positive one? For all involved, then?”

Rey saw his brow furrow slightly and feet shift beneath himself before Ben answered. “I do.
Yeah,” he said, feeling more positive. “I do.”

“Fantastic,” Snoke said. “I’ll be sure to mention that when I speak with Gwen Phasma later about your reckless and selfish, potentially criminal dismissal of her.”

Ben tilted his head to the side, watching the blame fall at his feet.

“So that’s what this is about, then,” he sighed.

“That’s what you have to say for yourself,” Snoke chuckled lightly, raising her eyebrows. “You single-handedly demolish a lucrative business arrangement between our studio and one of its most valuable management team partners, and that’s what you have to say for yourself.”

Ben blinked at her.

“You’re pathetic,” she snarled, spitting it out, causing Rey to jump slightly in her seat.

Ben shifted beside her and Rey shot a worried look at his face.

“You march in here with your human trash girlfriend and your arrogant, moody boy, teenaged angst bullshit and that’s what you have to say for yourself. I only wish I was more surprised,” she sneered.

She continued before Ben could respond. “You think you can just hire and fire people like you’re the goddamned king of the universe, do you? You can choose for yourself where you go and what you do and with whom you do it, do you? Is that right?”

Silence suspended the entire room for a moment before she went on, booming. “Is it?!”

“The working relationship between Gwen Phasma and myself broke down…” Ben began before Snoke threw her head back and laughed loudly.

“Oh, it must be lovely to roll so deeply in white male privilege that the universe is required to present itself to you, spread-eagle and mute for you to fuck over as you please. How marvelous to be so steeped in the trappings of a well-bred life you can flippantly destroy careers and agreements and contract clauses with your fragile masculinity and your mansplaining,” Snoke railed.
Rey gaped as she listened to the attack continue. Her eyes flew between Snoke, her blazing eyes narrowed to slits inside deeply kohl-rimmed eyelids, and Ben beside her, whose Adam’s apple bobbed visibly as he took the verbal lashing.

“I…” he protested, trying to get a word in edgewise but, there was no chance Snoke was handing over the floor now.

“You what…?” she mocked before continuing. “You didn’t like working with the big, strong woman so you decided to show her who was boss? Was that it? Hmm?” she scoffed, continuing. “I wonder how many other women have fallen prey to your pitiful need for an ego stroke. I wouldn’t wonder at all how many women you’ve needed to dominate in order to feel more manly, ” she lowered her voice in mock masculinity cruelly, lifting her arms to flex her biceps in a show of disdain.

Rey scooted forward in her seat, wondering how far to let this train of disparaging travel.

Should she say something?

This was getting out of hand.

Wasn’t it?

And I thought Hux was bad, she thought.

Ben sat mutely, his eyes tracking Snoke’s every move while the rest of his body stayed still as a statue.

“I’ve been in this business long enough to know what toxic masculinity smells like, I assure you, and you, my dear boy, absolutely reek of it,” she wheezed disgustedly. “You’re not fit to lick Gwen Phasma’s boots as far as I’m concerned. You, a miserable, lazy drunk who hasn’t done an honest day’s work in his life without leaving a string of massive fuck-ups in your wake, who grew up in the lap of luxury and expect every bitch in town to roll over and let you rut her raw…to think you waltzed in and tried to dismantle a hard-working woman like that, well…all I can say is you have quite a lot to make up for at this point. Quite a lot indeed.”

Ben swallowed and moved closer to the desk but, kept his hands in his lap.
“That is just not what happened at all. If you would just listen to my side of the story…” he began.

“Your side of the story is one I most certainly do not have time for,” Snoke said dismissively. “I am far too busy to listen to the pretend apologies of a sniveling little man-baby who’s been spanked by his mommy.”

Ben glared at Snoke in a stand-off and she glared right back at him, seething in her silk blouse and diamonds.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve cost this studio in your wildly irresponsible actions? What kind of ramifications your firing of her set into motion? What kind of political nightmare…the far-reaching financial implications something like that causes…Do you?” Snoke demanded.

Ben studied her face as she continued, almost amused at his silence.

“No. No, of course you don’t. You’re too dumb to be able to comprehend the scope of your little act,” she sighed, bored with the conversation.

“Gwen Phasma is the most influential publicist working in the business today,” Snoke explained, her every word laced with bitterness. “Her predominance, her force in this town cannot be overstated, something you cannot put a price tag on, having that kind of leverage in my pocket. And you unceremoniously shit on her, costing us not only her services for you but, for every single other person contracted with this studio who was formerly working with her. She has major sway over the press, as I am sure I don’t have to tell you and she was of value when one of my people fucks up and needs their ass covered. That working relationship should have been held in the utmost regard, not spat on like some seedy, back alley whore you were finished using. Untold amounts of revenue, scores of films, exponentially more money than you could fathom disintegrated and disappeared when you fired that woman, and you are responsible for very single dime we will never recover as a result.”

She breathed deeply and pushed her seat back slightly before lunging across the desk, palms flat when she spoke. “And you don’t even care,” Snoke accused him. “You’re too stupid to understand the implications of your revoltingly self-centered choices. Just like the uneducated moron you are, you don’t even understand it all, do you?”

Rey lifted a hand to her forehead lightly, feeling overheated the longer this tornado of insults and insinuations swirled around Ben beside her.
Ben stole a glance at her and looked back at Snoke.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

Snoke lifted an eyebrow and tilted her chair back slightly. “What indeed,” she said slowly. “Here’s what is going to happen now,” she announced before taking a breath and launching in.

“The State Department has completed arrangements with the People’s Republic of China for shooting to begin on a production in Shanghai in two week’s time. The script has just been approved and the crew has all been hired. Casting is complete and final preparations are being coordinated by the producers to begin filming on March 1st. And I have decided to graciously assign you this vehicle as a means of making amends for your deplorable behavior in Canada.”

Ben blinked and looked from Snoke to Rey and back again.

“Excuse me?”

“You will be shooting in China in two weeks,” Snoke restated. “It’s all decided. Filming lasts 4 months.”

“What the - “ Ben stuttered. “I’m not going to China! I don’t know anything about that project,” he shouted. “I just got home!”

“You’ll go where I tell you to go and you’ll be happy about it,” Snoke said smoothly, her venomous tone unflustered, “you’ll go and you’ll keep your goddamn mouth shut about it and keep your goddamn dick in your pants while you’re there and try not to bring any more fuck dolls home with you,” she said, eyeing Rey openly.

It was Ben’s turn to gape and Rey’s head began to pulse painfully.

*China?*

*Four months?*

*What about their plans? Their house? Their lives?*
“Listen. Ms. Snoke. Please. I am not prepared to leave the States. I apologize for what happened with Gwen Phasma. I do. I really do. It was an…untenable situation but, I swear to you, I never would have fired her out of a mere act of cruelty. I had reasons. And beyond that, I never would have lifted a finger let alone anything else to hurt her,” Ben said, as Snoke rolled her eyes and allowed her eyes to remain staring at the ceiling contemptuously.

“We are buying a home. We are starting a life here together - Rey and I,” he revealed, motioning where she sat beside him, her heart beating wildly as she watched the drama unfold, “and I have no interest and frankly no intention of heading overseas right now to film anything.”

“I don’t give a fuck what your intentions are,” Snoke said evenly. “I made you. I own you. I can break you into rubble and burn you to a pile of ash if I choose and you will stand there and take it because you know to your core…it’s what you’re worth,” she leaned in and spoke quietly. “Isn’t it, Solo?”

Rey swallowed a bright gulp of acid just listening to the vitriol roll through the room towards Ben, waves of animosity crashing around him from his boss as she continued to insult his character, his upbringing, his choices.

“You will get your sorry, good-for-nothing ass on that plane and fly to China when I tell you to and make whatever goddamn film I tell you to make and you will be on your best fucking behavior while you are there,” she announced. “And then you can come back home and shack up with whatever down-home, backwater slut you settle for at the moment until I am ready for you to do something else. And you will be happy about it.”

“I won’t.” Ben warned in a low voice. “I will not.” He straightened his spine and pulled his shoulders backward. “I’ll quit.”

Snoke threw her head back and laughed heartily again. “Oh please,” she said. “Quit all you want. Quit all the way from here to Shanghai for all the fucks I give. I’ve got your name on a contract that says you owe me 5 more pictures, Solo, or did you forget our December renegotiations?”

Ben slumped slightly as he listened to her enjoy this, his shoulders sagging as the wheels in his head turned.

“You think I’m kidding when I say I own you?” she asked with another chuckle. “I own you, Solo,” she emphasized. “You can’t even pull your dick out to take a piss unless I give you permission.”
Rey took a huge breath in an attempt to steady her breathing and shoved back a wave of nausea that was assaulting her.

“Ben, I…” she whispered, hoping for escape.

“Sue me. Sue me for all I’m worth if you need. I won’t let you walk all over me and act like I’m your slave,” Ben declared. “I don’t care about the contract.”

Rey felt a swell of admiration for him rise as she swallowed thickly, willing her head to stop pounding.

“Well, you’d better care about the contract,” Snoke replied, unbothered, “you’ll be in debt up to your eyeballs the rest of your life once this studio is done with you. And I wonder at all those media headlines you’ll have to endure in that case. Sloshed Solo Sued for Breach of Contract. Should make for stunning press.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed and his brows furrowed as he concentrated on her threats. “And I wonder at all those veteran soldiers you buddy around with,” she continued, making them both snap to attention. “I wonder how well they’d get on without poor little rich boy’s coat tails to ride into work over and over.”

She leaned over the desk and looked at Ben pointedly. “I wonder what else they’d find if they really started looking more closely. What types of unsavory details the media might mine if they went in search of a story. Whether there might be anyone who might implicate you in other moral lapses in judgement. Any young starlets or better yet, any award winners the press might dredge up to tarnish your precious, shiny, golden boy image. Hmmm? There are an awful lot of men in this town who thought they could get away with shitty behavior in the past and it’s come back to bite them in the cock now. Destroys their world, their children’s world, their children’s children’s world…it would be a ridiculously stupid choice to make to gamble with that potential mess just to avoid one short trip overseas for one film. A film that could bring in several hundred million and help make up in some small way for the absolutely astronomical amount of money your careless actions cost this studio and every, single person who works for it.”

“I…I…” Ben was speechless.

“Remarkably eloquent as that sentiment is, you’ll need to leave now,” Snoke directed. “I have a conference call with Jennifer Allison and Gwen Phasma in ten. An important one. Oh - did you
know she’s working for your ex, now?”

There was no denying she definitely felt like vomiting now, Rey decided, the bile rising in her throat, burning tears into her eyes and an urge to run shooting through her legs, her stomach a rolling mess of shaky fear and anguished anxiety she just barely held at bay.

“We’re leaving,” Ben said, standing and holding out a hand for Rey.

“Be on the plane in two weeks,” Snoke said blithely.

“You’ll hear from my lawyers,” Ben said without turning around to face her.

“The choice it yours,” Snoke said. “But, if you do find legal counsel to contact the studio, I do hope they’re fast about it.”

Rey focused hard on the door as she turned and leaned into Ben as they made their way across the deep, cushioned carpeting towards the exit.

“Shut the door behind you, Solo,” Snoke said as he turned the handle to open the heavy door. “This is a private phone call I don’t intend anyone overhearing.”

Rey’s head demanded attention as Ben pulled the door closed behind them firmly, her stomach a geyser of violently agitated bile and she panicked, looking around for a way to prepare before spotting a lined, golden trash can seated neatly beside Snoke’s assistant’s desk, its owner politely tapping away at a computer.

Rey lunged for the trash can and heaved furiously into it, purging the toxicity from her stomach as well as her mind, expelling Snoke’s hateful diatribe from herself, from Ben, from the air around them with a force that shocked her and two things dawned on her in that exact moment.

Shakily, she rose from the ground where she had been kneeling and wiped at her mouth and teary eyes, looking up to see a stunned and horrified studio assistant staring down at her agape, her mouth a shocked “o” and her nose wrinkled in distaste.
“Sorry about that,” she whispered, clearing her throat and standing with Ben’s help, leaning into him while he wrapped an arm around her.

“Baby,” he drawled, his voice thick with tenderness as he pulled Rey close.

Rey looked up at his liquid brown eyes and as her eyes flew between his, felt a certainty flood the vacant space in her stomach, a purely instinctual insistence rise in her spirit and take flight as she felt her back straighten.

Pulling away from his embrace, Rey turned on her heel and spun to the door behind them, swinging it open forcibly with a sure tug, satisfied when she heard the handle crack against the adjoining wall.

She strode two steps back into Snoke’s office, thrilling to see the momentary flare of surprise flash across the woman’s face and she planted her feet wide as she spoke clearly and directly.

“They raise us in the south not to sass our elders so normally, I wouldn’t yell at an old lady like you,” Rey snapped. “But, if you ever speak to my husband that way again, I will show you just how dirty southern girls can fight.”

Her breasts heaved as she glared at Snoke where she sat, speechless behind her behemoth desk before she wheeled around and stormed through the door, leaving it open on her way out.

She grabbed Ben by the hand, tugging him past the aghast assistant, still fumbling with the abused trash can and around a corner until they were out of sight, adrenaline coursing through Rey’s body enough that it was another 10 feet before she caught her breath, slowed her steps and giggled slightly as she caught a glimpse of Ben’s bewildered face looking down at her.

She paused and smiled shyly up at him before burying her face in his chest, right there in the hallway but, out of earshot of anyone who might have witnessed that scene at Snoke’s office, and he wrapped his arms around her, his nose in her hair as they took a moment to get their feet planted on terra firma again.

“That was incredible,” he praised her. “Unbelievable. You were unbelievable back there, baby doll!”
Rey smiled up at Ben and searched his eyes, crinkled with awe and a hint of pleasure and she whispered to him, “you and me, handsome. You and me.”

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Rey shuddered to think what state Ben would have been in, had Snoke been allowed to get away with kicking him out of her office unchallenged because he was still loopy, still swinging madly between anxiety over Snoke’s thinly veiled, slanderous threats and elation over Rey’s protection of him, her adamant refusal to hear him disrespected.

“Let’s find some lunch, Ben, yeah? You hungry?” she asked as he sat behind the wheel of his car, still occasionally shaking his head quietly, either in disbelief or devestation, making Rey wonder whether he was actually seeing the road in front of them at all or whether he was replaying the horrific office scene play out over and over in his own mind.

“Yeah - yeah,” he agreed, blinking quickly and changing lanes cautiously, finding his way to an exit. “Let me take you out, baby. Find you some tacos,” he said with a small smile.

Rey grinned at him and ran a hand into his hair. “I love you,” she reminded him.

Ben nodded and looked at her long enough to wink at her, and set about finding them food, the late morning sun streaming over the convertible top like a heavy yellow quilt, the day spreading out in strangely overshadowed unknowns in every direction.

**********

Rey rode the elevator beside Ben towards his apartment feeling sorry they’d decided on tacos but, unwilling to complain. She rested her head on his shoulder and felt him plant a kiss on her head, making her think of all the elevators they’d ridden together in the past, and how wherever they were going it was okay if they were together. She was tired with all the food rushing blood to her stomach and this day had already offered more excitement than she had expected or preferred.

All she wanted was to sit down and snuggle up beside her fiancé on a couch somewhere and nap. Or better yet, a bed.
The elevator doors opened and Rey felt her feet drag as Ben led her by the hand to the door of his condo, his keys jingling as they approached, and Rey gasped slightly when he found the door was already unlocked. He quickly looked down at Rey and let go of her hand to gently position her behind himself, opening the door quietly and peering inside.

“Mom!” Rey heard him exclaim, before following him inside the condo, feeling her heart speed exponentially upon realizing this was it, this was happening, she was about to lay eyes on her boyfriend’s…no, her fiancé’s mother, and that woman was none other than her lifelong hero, Leia Organa.

Rey took a deep breath, licking her lips and willing her face into an approximation of a sweet smile, no time at all to pep talk herself with a wise saying before she came up beside Ben and looked to see Leia walking towards them with outstretched arms, reaching for her son beside Rey with all the glowing force of a hundred suns.

The top of her mass of thick, salt and pepper hair was held back with a barrette, pulled away from her red glasses attached to silver chain on both ends, her familiar smile and strong arms coming to reach around her much-larger son while she greeted him in a voice Rey would have recognized anywhere.

“You’re home,” Leia noted as she patted his back, Ben stooped over halfway bent in the middle, hugging her in return. “Good shoot, I hope?”

“Yeah, good shoot,” Ben affirmed. “Mom, this is my Rey,” he introduced her, reaching for Rey, his hand finding the small of her back as he pulled her closer into their huddle. “My fiancé,” he announced, unmistakable pride in his voice.

Leia smiled warmly at Rey as she stood assessing, tilting her face to one side and then another. “How in God’s name did you land such a stunner, son?”

Rey felt a warmth bloom over her cheeks and she giggled as Leia pulled her close for a matching hug.

“So nice to meet you, Mrs. Organa,” Rey stammered, overpowered by the gravity of the moment. It was one thing to meet your hero, another to meet your future husband’s mother and altogether a completely different thing to meet both those figures all at once.
Rey swayed slightly on her feet as she pulled back from Leia’s embrace and bit her lip in concentration.

“Please,” Leia said. “Call me Leia. Or hell, call me mom. Whatever you want, you pick,” she quipped, turning to head for the couch. “Come sit down, sweetheart, you look a bit woozy,” she said, eyeing Rey as they made their way to sit.

Ben sighed and slumped beside Rey on the couch, pulling her close and Rey snuggled into his arm, remembering what they’d been through that morning and feeling the need to offer him whatever comfort she could under the circumstances. Her weariness evaporated as her glee at being face-to-face with Leia settled inside her, and she curled her feet close under herself on the couch.

“Shitty morning,” Ben groaned slightly, running a hand over his face. “Met with Snoke at her office. It did not go well,” he shared.

Leia looked between Ben and Rey, watching them meet one another’s eyes and share a look before she spoke.

“Son, why don’t you go for a run, now that you’re home? You haven’t been here to do that in a while, I’ll keep Rey company and you can go burn off some steam,” Leia said. “I’ve got to be at the Hilton in an hour but, I just wanted to stop by and grab a quick hug anyhow. Whatever that bitch has done, don’t let it eat at you. Go. Run it off,” she said, knowing her son very well.

“Yeah?” he asked, looking to Rey for confirmation.

“Good idea,” Rey said, nodding at him beside her.

“Okay,” he said, moving to get off the couch. “Thanks, baby.”

In three minutes’ time he was sprinting out the front door, sunglasses and hat in hand, changed and looking ready to run the bulls in Pamplona after leaning down to kiss his mother goodbye on her cheek and Rey goodbye on her lips, and affirming he’d be back soon before leaving the two ladies alone in his condo with the early afternoon sun pouring through the sliders beyond them in peace.
“So,” Leia said. “The girl I’ve heard so much about. Tell me all about the girl my son has finally found.”

“Oh, there’s not that much to tell,” Rey confessed. “Just a normal girl, very little of interest to share,” she apologized, feeling antsy.

“I very much doubt that, my girl,” Leia chortled. “Tell me what you do in Tennessee, for starters. Ben says you are a shop owner? Is that right?”

“Yes,” Rey said, embarrassment creeping up her neck, “a video shop co-owner. Called…The Resistance,” she shared cautiously, aware she was exposing herself as a fan, unsure whether that was a good or bad thing.

“Is that right?” Leia chuckled, her eyes crinkling in amusement the way Ben’s did when he laughed. “Like in Cosmic Battles? That Resistance?”

A smile spread across Rey’s face as she revealed more. “The very same. Even have a poster of our heroine on the wall behind the counter, right in the front of the shop,” she held up her hands as if to display it physically for Leia. “A woman’s place is in the resistance,” she quoted.

Leia sighed deeply and leaned back, lacing her hands over her soft belly.


One side of her mouth quirked upwards in a knowing smile as she looked at Rey intently. “You do know it’s all horse shit. Right?” she asked, sounding very sure of herself and not at all as if she were asking an actual question.

Rey stared at her blankly.

*What was horse shit?*

*The movie?*

*The quote?*
“That quote wasn’t even in the actual movie, even though it’s a good line,” she went on. “The truth is, a woman’s place isn’t in the resistance, Rey. You do know that. Right?” she repeated. “A woman’s place is actually wherever the hell she chooses it to be.”

A smile spread across Rey’s face as she studied her future mother-in-law’s eyes as they peered back at her, something threading between them made of understanding, of sorority, of love for the same human man, of grace and hope and Rey felt a burden lift from somewhere deep in her soul, an anchor rising from an ocean floor she’d dropped there once and never revisited.

Something heavy alighted and took flight, unburdening her as she looked at Ben’s mother and wiggled the ring on her left hand again.

*Wherever I choose to be, she thought. That’s where I belong.*

*Why didn’t I think of that?*

Rey grinned at Leia.

“Leia, can I get you a cup of coffee?” she asked, standing to host her fiancé’s mother as she moved towards the small kitchen.

“Oh, here,” Leia said, standing to walk with Rey to the kitchen. “I’ll come with you. I know where he keeps the real sugar.”

*************

Thirty minutes later, Ben jogged back inside, sweaty and looking deliriously happy to be so, relieved of so much stress, Rey made a mental note to encourage him to go for a run when he was stressed in the future, mentally filing it away for reference.

He smiled at his mother and his future bride chatting over coffee curled up together on the couch and he threw himself into a chair opposite them with a water bottle, chugging happily as the endorphins and serotonin flooded his body with relief, his pores expunging the brutality of his meeting with Snoke with every step of his run, the water cleansing him with every sip.
“Rey was just filling me in on your interesting meeting with Gemma Snoke this morning,” Leia informed Ben. “Hateful old shrew,” she mumbled. “She’s always been one nasty piece of work, the old hag.”

“Yeah, she’s quite a piece of work,” Ben agreed. “I’m afraid she’s got me where she wants me, too,” Ben said, his mood visibly wilting as he stared up at the ceiling, studying it for answers. “I…I don’t know what to do, mom,” Ben confessed, causing Rey to wonder as he did when the last time was he’d asked his mother for advice.

“Well son, it sounds like she thinks she’d got you by the short hairs. But honestly, nothing is iron clad in this town. Nothing. Everything is built on an illusion in this business, even contracts. I’m sure I could get your contract to my lawyers and get this straightened out in a way that leaves everyone satisfied, no matter what she’s saying right now. If…if you want me to be involved that much,” Leia offered.

Ben glanced at Rey and she felt her heart lurch. She raised her eyebrows in assent, sending him a signal meaning why not?


Leia smiled at Ben and patted Rey’s knee where it was curled up on the couch between them.

“Nothing would make me happier than to see that woman have to deal with a reckoning,” Leia said, darkly. “Trust me, it’s my pleasure.”

She placed her coffee mug on the table in front of the couch and stood to move, retrieving her Louis Vuitton bag as she slipped on kitten heels beneath her slim capris and sweater set.

“I’ve got to be going,” she said, kissing both their cheeks, one at a time. “Thanks for the coffee,” she said, patting Ben’s arm as she replaced her glasses with oversized sunglasses, her movie star persona emerging as she did so.

“I’ll have the legal team give you a call,” Leia assured Ben as she stepped into the hallway, leaving the condo. “Goodbye, son,” she said with a smile before peering around him to Rey. “Goodbye, daughter. Good work today, fighting for one another. Both of you. Well done,” she said with a wink and then she was gone.
To: Ben Solo
From: G Snoke
5:22 pm

Booking best suite for
the wife and yourself in
Shanghai.
She may be my
favorite fucking
Solo yet.
Do not disappoint me.

- S

Rey ambled down the wooden steps leading to El Matador beach beside Ben, stopping every 4 or 5 stairs to gasp in wonder at the site before her.

The glory of the sky streaked in neon orange and yellow, highlights of purple and red straining to make their own strands visible through the tapestry of vibrant sunset colors blazing across the sky in infinite shades of the sleepy sun captivated her wholly, and Ben chuckled as he continued to encourage her to the actual sand below.

“We’ll miss it, at this pace,” he teased her, waiting while she snapped photo after photo of the setting sun against the rocky beach backdrop below. “It’ll be here tomorrow night, too, you know.”

“Listen, just because this is old hat to you doesn’t mean it’s not impressive,” she argued, ignoring him while she played the tourist and snapped another picture on her phone.

She weaved her fingers through his and breathed deeply, savoring the salt air and the cold sand as
she kicked off her boots and socks, digging her toes into the wet, chilled ground immediately, crunching the coarse sand under her feet just as she’d always dreamed of doing.

“That is incredible,” she said breathlessly, leaning against a charcoal gray rock formation to watch the white-capped waves crash against the deeply tanned sand beyond, the surf rolling in nearly to their toes, cresting and foaming a foot from them before retreating back to its ocean depths, trading places with a different wave sent from the Pacific.

“What a day,” Ben sighed, his hand at the back of Rey’s neck, both their eyes trained on the water and the sun dipping low to spread its rays towards the ends of the earth beneath the endless blue horizon.

“What a day,” Rey repeated, slipping her far hand into her pocket.

*It all made sense,* she thought.

The mood swings.
The nausea.
The food aversion.
The exhaustion.

Not wanting smores?
Lattes not appealing?
Naps mid-afternoon?
The sadness, the airplane sickness, the sleeping…it all made sense.

*Nothing* had ever made more sense.

She hadn’t known and then suddenly, she had.

She’d known with every fiber in her being, even before she took the test, even before she bought it and surreptitiously slipped it into her bag while Ben was buying gum, even before it was two lines instead of just one as soon as she peed on the stick, she’d known.

She’d known the moment she started counting weeks backward, realizing she’d been sick, sniffly
with a cold and on antibiotics back in December, just prior to Ben surprising her and sweeping her away in a torrent of passion on New Year’s.

She’d known it even while understanding the media would paint her as a vicious, money-grubbing slut, and she’d known it when she’d looked at her mother-in-law and received the right to be equipped, armed, autonomous - to decide for her own damn self where she belonged.

She’d known in a heartbeat, in an instant, this was hers and his and she was more sure than she’d ever been in her life.

It dawned on her the very instant she looked up from the golden trash can in the assistant’s office at Snoke’s, just as it had become crystal clear to her in that moment she was about to defend her man to a women who had attempted to eviscerate him.

She pulled the test from her pocket and held it up in her left hand, her diamond ring sparkling in the setting flames of sunset and elbowed Ben in the ribs gently to get his attention.

She felt him shift and she peeked up at his face as he focused on the pregnancy test held aloft in her hand, backlit by the Pacific Ocean burying the setting February sun in an array of electrified hues.

“Is this…is this yours?” he stuttered, choking on his words. “Is this yours? Is this ours? Are we…are you….are we…” he stumbled over his words.

Rey laughed out loud at him while she watched his face transform from stupefaction to joy and as he crushed her to himself and she felt her heart overflow with bliss, Ben’s elation palpable in his huffed gasps of shock giving way to his hearty laughter at another day of purely unexpected surprise.

The sun was setting and the day was ending but, something else, something grander was beginning.

Something beautiful was breaking open, brand new and breathtaking.

Rey tilted her face to kiss her almost-husband’s lips as she felt him lean down into her and she shook slightly as the cool Los Angeles sand sent a chill thought her bones.

“Let’s go home, wife,” Ben whispered as he tugged her beneath his arm into himself, heading for the long climb back to the car at the top of the steep staircase.
There were so many steps facing them and Rey drew a mighty breath and started to climb.

********
Chapter Summary

A couple more chapters to go and this work is complete! I have a few more ideas up my sleeve still.

Thank you to all my readers, you who have become friends and supporters of this work, as well as True North, following this story for months now. It means so much to me, I cannot adequately express it but, I am so, so thankful.

Thank you as well, for the thoughtful and patient discourse on Chapter 18's handling of Snoke and the reveal of her characterization. I appreciate that as a fandom, you allowed the space to break down stereotypes, challenge broad thinking and create space to see people, even other women, as perpetrators of violence as well as survivors and commit to validating the experience someone shares, regardless of its' palatability.
As a survivor of violence myself, I believe this is an invaluable conversation to have and I appreciate endlessly your willingness as a room to listen, hear and offer comment.

I am always here to listen if you have words to share.
Always.

You guys are the actual best and I love you endlessly.
xo
Berry

Chapter Notes

moodboard by my always-faithful @rileybabe
“Home is any four walls that enclose the right person.”

- Helen Rowland
“But, are you sure the baby can’t feel anything?”

“Ben, yes. I promise,” Rey laughed as she pulled her fiancé down to cover her as she giggled up at him in bed. “I’ll go see the doctor when I get home but, yes, I am sure sex is okay when you’re pregnant and you’re not going to traumatize him, and he can’t feel anything and for God’s sake just come on and do it already.”

Rey squirmed beneath him while Ben kissed her neck and played keep-away, peppering her with questions while he attacked her throat and chest with his face, making her laugh at his excessive caution.

He’d already pulled her by the hips above his face where he lay on his back, pumping his cock with one hand while keeping her ass positioned where he could lick up into her pussy as he moaned, Rey riding his tongue until she shattered a moaning mess around his name in the LA morning quiet of his condo. He’d already tugged his old Def Leppard t-shirt off her, pulled her lace panties off and tossed her onto the bed beside him while she gasped and recovered, licking at her breasts and groaning as she writhed, boneless in overstimulation and bliss under him, and now he was hesitating as Rey waited on him to act further.

It was cute and endearing but, Rey wanted her man to fuck her now, and he wasn’t getting the message.

“How do you know it’s a boy? What if it’s a girl?” he murmured into her ear while he pinned her wrists and slowly drove her mad.

“Oh my God. Ben Solo, if you don’t stop asking me questions and deliver the goods here in a minute, I am going to pin you and take over,” she threatened, raising her eyebrows when he pulled back to look at her.

“Now there’s a thought,” he teased mercilessly, grinning down at her before kissing her deeply. “Mrs. Solo, am I driving you crazy? You want to take over, huh? Teach me a lesson?”

Rey stopped kissing him and stilled her squirming completely, assuming a serious tone.

“I could have a wave of morning sickness at any moment and have to go puke.”
Ben thought for a moment, studying her eyes.

“Yeah, you’re right, let’s get down to business,” he said, moving to align himself with her wet pussy and making her grin with his earnestness. “Pretty soon this will be a lot trickier,” he said, as he began to move inside her, eye-to-eye with his future bride, speaking between thrusts. “Your belly’s gonna be nice and round and your tits are gonna get bigger and heavier. Fuck, baby doll, I swear, I had no idea how proud of myself I’d be when I knocked you up but, I gotta tell you – knowing I fucked a baby in you is getting me off right now.”

Rey bit her lip at him and chuckled as he enjoyed the moment, tracing his back under her hands.

She only had two more days until she headed home to Tennessee and she wanted to savor every second they had together. Once she got back to the North Shore she’d have logistics and plans and decisions to face but, while she was in California all she had to worry about was her own little family – just her and Ben and the baby they’d made in her womb – and it grounded her in a peaceful contentment she’d never known before.

Tears sprung to her eyes as Ben slowed and kissed her deeply.

“Hey. What’s wrong? Baby, tell me,” he said softly, seeing teardrops slip from the edges of her eyes and slide down her cheeks.

“I just love you,” she said. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, Rey.

She shook her head and sniffed hard. “Don’t pay any attention to me. I’m hormonal and emotional. Fuck me and come in me. That’s what I want. You’re all I want, husband.”

Ben sped up and their mouths collided in a rush of motion, kissing one another as if to secure the ends of all loose pieces of themselves, hungry to accept and take all the other had to give.

Rey pushed gently on Ben’s chest and shoved until he retreated, making space as she crawled to her knees, offering him a different position to enter her.

“Fuck, baby. You are so hot,” he said as his big hands took hold of her hips, centering himself behind her and making Rey grin as she looked back at him over her shoulder.

“Will you still think that when I’m huge with this baby?”

Ben groaned as he plunged inside her and crowded her back and neck underneath himself, tangling one hand in her hair and pulling her head back as he leaned down onto the bed beside her with the other.

“You will always be the most gorgeous woman on earth to me.”
Rey smiled as he slipped a hand from her hair to her pussy and circled her, fingers grazing the place he entered her until they both came, panting and clutching at one another, an exquisite completion before they collapsed on the bed beside one another.

Rey curled her body around him, her hands coming to lace his against his abs as she laid her head against his back, their breathing synchronizing as they caught their breath.

“Does this make you the little spoon?” she asked, kissing his wide, muscled back while he tugged her arm further around himself.

“Oh, no,” Ben snorted. “I am the big spoon. I am always the big spoon. I just want to take advantage of feeling your tits on my back before your belly gets in the way.”

Rey pulled her hand away and smacked him playfully while he laughed at his own joke before resettling against the pillows.

“Oh…my…God,” Ben groaned, each word escalating in a crescendo of frustration. “Why can’t we just have a quiet morning together? When we go on our honeymoon I fucking swear to God, we are not bringing any wretched phones,” he announced as he reached for the offending phone, dinging a demanding text.

“No,” he spit out a moment later, vitriol coloring his tone.

“What’s wrong? Who is it?” Rey asked, feeling him roll onto his back and face her beside him in bed.

“Hux. He wants to come talk. I texted him about Snoke last night and he wants a sit-down.”

Rey resisted the urge to roll her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, too.

A morning meeting with Hux was about the last thing on her personal agenda but, they had left things kind of a mess two days ago at Snoke’s office and apart from dropping off a brand spanking new, silver garbage can for her assistant with a note that said, “sorry I vomited in your pretty trash can the other day – Rey” that situation had remained fairly unresolved.

Leia’s legal team had spent the better part of the afternoon the day before on speaker phone with Ben while he sat with her feet in his lap on the couch and they watched Brooklyn Nine-Nine on mute but, Rey knew things had yet to be worked out totally and it wasn’t unreasonable to expect Hux to want face time with Ben.

Rey turned to Ben and forced a small smile. “Breakfast first?”

“Definitely. I cannot meet with Hux when I’m hangry.”

Rey and Ben rolled out of bed and showered quickly, happy to share the space and unwilling to be separated by more than a towel or two until they made their way to breakfast around the corner and
headed back, tummies full of filled doughnuts and ball caps pulled over their hair, dark sunglasses, sweatpants and disposable coffees in-hand completing the covert look as they walked hand-in-hand back to Ben’s building.

Maybe they had to face Hux but, no need to be reckless about it.
Rey had a family to think about now.

**********

Hux’s arms were crossed and his eyebrows raised in a devastating look of judgement when Rey and Ben rounded the corner to Ben’s condo hallway, his back straight and his feet planted as if he owned the space beneath him.

“I’ve been waiting 10 minutes, Solo,” he said as they approached.

Ben dropped Rey’s hand and fiddled with the keys, unlocking the door and holding the door open for Rey who entered first and then turned on her heel to hold up a hand halting them, Ben and Hux both freezing.

“Hux,” she said, her stomach rolling slightly as she lifted her chin at him while both men looked down at her. “You may only come inside if you are nice. I have listened to you scream like a child at Ben twice already and I’m not going to do it a third time. Now, I know you have business to work out and I understand that. But, Ben is my family. And I’m about done listening to you be ugly to my family.”

Hux looked at Ben briefly before returning his gaze to Rey warily.

“Alright,” he offered suspiciously.

“I’m Rey,” she said resolutely, holding her hand out to offer a handshake. “Not ‘Flavor of the Month’. Not ‘Miss Chattahoochee.’ Rey.”

Hux smirked and shook her hand, pumping twice while holding Rey’s stare.

“Rey. This,” he said, looking at Ben and back to Rey again, “I can work with.”

Rey turned and walked into the condo while the men followed, hearing the door close while Hux and Ben took seats at Ben’s kitchen table.
“Baby, please stay,” Ben said as he glimpsed Rey heading for the bedroom to leave them in privacy. “This is your life, too.”

Rey nodded and pulled out a chair, sinking down gratefully.

******

“You’re kidding me,” Leia said, while Ben repeated his conversation with Hux from that morning over the phone.

The morning meeting had been over and Ben was updating his mom over the phone while Rey listened to a replay from her seat on the couch beside him.

“Nope,” Ben replied. “I was just as surprised as you are but, apparently, lots of people want Snoke out of power and bringing this whole mess to Phasma and Jen was the wrong move to make.”

“Wow,” Leia said. “So, why were Jen and Phasma willing to play ball and go to bat for you? Didn’t you fire Phasma? And I know you and Jennifer didn’t end on the best of terms.”

“Well, what you said the other day, about this town being built on illusions? You were right,” Ben explained. “From what Hux said, Snoke met with Jen and Phasma and it went badly. Snoke insinuated she would drag Jen’s name through the mud if Jen didn’t come up with some dirt to use on me.

“She was trying to get me to make that movie in China for her by manipulating Jen and that was a mistake. Jen sure as shit didn’t care about helping me make a 250-million-dollar movie. No way was she going to get caught lying. The last thing Jen Allison wants is another scandal after getting caught in Italy with Josh McBrannon last year when he was married. She hasn’t had a good project since that whole PR nightmare. She’s not looking to have a past relationship inspected and be found to be fabricating bullshit.

“So, it wasn’t so much Jennifer being your friend as it was she didn’t want it to end badly for herself,” Leia interpreted.

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. “She may be a cold-hearted opportunist but, Jen Allison is definitely no dummy. She had to know if she tried to sell the press a crock of shit, it could potentially go south on her and then she’d have dug her own grave.”

“Alright well, one point for Jennifer Allison, I guess,” Leia said begrudgingly. “I’ll at least give her credit for being smart.”
“Anyway,” Ben continued, “Jen flat-out refused, said she wouldn’t do something as stupid and hateful as make a false claim against me, and she sure as shit wasn’t going to do it just because Snoke wanted her to, there was nothing in it for her. Hux said they had a knock-down, drag-out catfight about it.”

“Oh, this gets better and better,” Leia chuckled.

“Just wait,” Ben continued. “Snoke said she’d go public about the fact the studio had basically bought Jen’s Oscar for her last year. She’d fuck up Jen’s reputation, find some dirt on her, whatever. Snoke said she could get Jen and McBrannon both blackballed for good if she didn’t come up with something to say about me.”

“That bitch. So, old lady Snoke thought she’d use Jen to throw dirt on your name and tried to blackmail Jennifer to do it. But, instead she met her match, eh?” Leia noted. “This feels a bit like Christmas, to be honest.”

“Yeah, and I know what Jen is like when you cross her. Trust me. It’s not pretty. Hux said Jen is still pissed Snoke made her stay with me last year through awards season. It fucked up Jen’s shot at becoming Mrs. McBrannon - surprise, surprise - which she blames Snoke for completely, come to find out, so Jen pitched Phasma the idea of paying Snoke back. Jen basically told Phasma to hitch her wagon to her star and they’d go places together.”

“Go on, go on,” Leia prompted.

“Jen told Phasma if she could get Hux to secure the film Snoke had offered to me that shoots out China in a couple weeks for herself, she’d hire Hux as her manager. Basically, Jen wants my management team and my film, and she wanted them to make it happen.”

“How do you feel about that, son?” Leia asked.

Ben snorted. “Are you kidding? Be rid of Hux and get out of that China shoot? I’m fucking over the moon about it.”

“Well, hallelujah then,” Leia crowed. “So, is that what happened, then?”

“Yeah. Hux met with Snoke yesterday and found out I refused the project. He told Phasma he thought they could get the role swapped out to Jen instead of me. Recast the love interest quickly. Keep everything the same, just make it her vehicle instead of mine. Some historical Asian female superhero thing.”

“Damn. I sort of want to see that,” Leia murmured.

“Well, if that film does over 200 million, it’s an automatic sequel so, you can. Jen will be set with a
franchise for a while which makes her happy and sets Phasma and Hux up nicely, too. Should make them all plenty of money.

“So anyhow, last night, Hux and Phasma went to the studio’s board of directors. They told them they might want to put together a short list of executives to replace Snoke, gave them a heads’ up some shit was about to hit the fan about Snoke cozying up to D.C. lobbyists, buying votes, something like that Phasma knew about and was sitting on. Told the board they’d want to cover their asses, and apparently, the board was sick of her too, and only too happy to have a way to get rid of Snoke.

“So, they fired her sometime last night. Apparently, it was in the dailies this morning all over town,” Ben finished.

“Oh, I saw them, trust me,” Leia said as she chuckled heartily. “I definitely saw them, and I definitely enjoyed them.”

“Yeah, well, it was all news to me,” Ben sighed, shaking his head while he ran a hand over the back of his neck. Rey could see the stress balled up in his shoulders and she determined to find them some dinner and maybe a walk on the beach when this phone call was over.

“Wow,” Leia sighed, sounding relieved and elated. “So, you’re off the hook then, huh, sweetheart? Nothing to worry about with Snoke out of the picture as long as Hux and the lawyers get you out of the China shoot and give it to Jennifer, is that right?”

“Well, basically. I mean, I still have something like five more films with the studio unless the lawyers can get me out of that somehow but, at least now I have a shot at working for someone more tolerable than Snoke moving forward.”

“Anyone would be better than that mega bitch,” Leia snarked, making Rey snort.

“That’s the truth.”

Leia and Ben sat in silence on the phone for a moment and Rey waited. It was a lot to take in.

At the moment, it felt nearly resolved but, LA felt a bit like Oz, people came and went so quickly here, and Rey felt her mind drift to Judy Garland and the yellow brick road, wondering if she clicked her heels and wished for home where she’d be once she opened her eyes.

It wouldn’t be without Ben, that’s for sure. He meant home.

“How’s Rey?” Leia asked.

“Good,” Ben said, turning to look at Rey while she ran her hand into the hair at the nape of his neck, smiling at him where he sat beside her on the couch. “Beautiful.”

“Oh Lord, son. You’ve got it bad.”
“I know.”

“Well, you two kids have a good night. I fly out to New York in the morning. I’ll see you when I get back to town. When will my future daughter-in-law be flying back out here? I want to get some things for the new house with her.”

“I don’t know, mom,” Ben said as he rolled his eyes lightly at his mother, making Rey smile. “I’ll tell her you said bye. Have a good flight.”

“Love you.”

“Love you back.”

Ben crawled towards Rey and laid his head in her lap while she ran her fingers through his hair, his long legs hanging over the end of the couch and his arms wrapped around her bottom tightly, the phone dropped onto the rug beneath them, unneeded and overheated with overuse.

“This is not how I wanted to spend our time in California together,” he moaned quietly while she ran her fingers over the edges of his ears, his brow, his jaw.

“Hey, it’s alright. It has to be done. And besides,” Rey said, scooting down until she was lying beside him on the couch, curled against him, the little spoon once more. “We have the whole rest of our lives together to be unexciting.”

“At least let’s go eat something delicious. And hey, let’s go walk the beach again.”

“You read my mind,” she replied happily, pulling his arms around her flat stomach, sending the force of their love to their baby sleeping beneath their joined hands.

********

To: Solo

From: Hux

12:03 am

Check the dailies in the AM.

- Hux

To: Hux
Flying to California had not been pleasant and Rey was not terribly excited about heading back.

No amount of positivity or pep talks could effectively counteract pregnancy nausea, Rey was beginning to understand, and she dreaded taking the long flight back to Tennessee alone the next day.

*Not alone,* she reminded herself, placing a hand on her belly. *And definitely worth the nearly-constant nausea but, not alone anymore. Never alone.*

She asked Ben to take her to see the Pacific Palisades house one more time, listening to him chatter on about escrow and school zones and construction projects, dreaming together about what kind of furniture they’d buy for the house and which beach they’d frequent as a family and what kind of car Ben wanted to buy for Rey.

Everything felt more manageable as Rey concentrated on looking forward as Ben drove, his hand on her knee and his deep voice centering her in what was true, what was real, what was solid.

The last couple days had been such a tumultuous whirlwind of shifting circumstances, Rey felt emotional whiplash, like she’d jumped onto a speeding train and held on for dear life but, she realized how serendipitous it was she’d been present and how difficult it would have been to hear
Ben try to explain all the details long-distance.

She thought about how many years he’d made all these decisions alone, walked each step by himself and she felt a surge of compassion for him, a protective wave flush her heart for him and she realized with a jolt while she was busy protecting and defending Ben, it left her defenseless to protect herself.

From abandonment.

From rejection.

From attack.

What if she needed rescue?

Her defenses were down, and she was vulnerable.

How right it was then, Ben was always the one busy defending her, in return.

She didn’t need rescue.

Neither did Ben.

They each just needed each other.

So, this is a family, she thought as they drove beneath tree boughs dappled with western morning sunshine, up into the Los Angeles hillside. Wherever I want to be.

“Hey, Dad,” Ben said over speaker through the car’s audio system when the call he’d made was answered.

“Hey, kid.”

Han Solo sounded exactly like Kentucky Smith which made sense, considering it was the role Rey would always most associate with him outside of the smuggler from Cosmic Battles and though she maybe should have expected it, hearing his gravelly voice made her feel a tiny bit starstruck, whether this was her fiancé’s father or not.

“Dad,” Ben said, drawing a breath, “I saw the Variety this morning. You want to fill me in on what you and Hux have been up to?”

Rey could almost see Han Solo smirk over the phone line, his signature side-smile pulling his cheek into a wisecracking, familiar shape and she grinned to herself, thinking how much Ben looked like his father, how often he’d pulled that same smile on her.
“Ya know, kid, I’ve just been a little bored is all. Got this call from your mother the other day and she told me all about ol’ Gemma Snoke and some shit storm over some shoot in China, some contract bullshit you’re mixed up in. Figured I could make old lady Snoke cream her panties one more time, make a movie or two for her and help you out at the same time.”

“Well, that’s nice and all Dad, but, did you hear she’s out at the studio, now?”

“Yes, I heard about it, the ginger told me. I’m still gonna make three films for the studio, anyhow. Actually, makes things even more cut and dried not having to mess with the old broad. I’ll get to make the new Kentucky Smith batch the way I want to make ‘em for once. Should be a lot of fun.”

Ben shook his head and looked hard at the road.

“You don’t have to do this, dad. I can handle my own contract. I can make the films. Really. I signed up for this, I can take care of my own responsibilities.”

“Your mother says you’re getting married,” Han said, changing the subject. “She’s a wonderful girl, your mother says and you’re buying a house in the hills and settling down. That right?”

“Yes,” Ben said slowly, measuring. “Her name is Rey. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Dad.”

“Well, that’s about the best goddamn thing I’ve heard in a long time. I’m happy for you, Ben.”

“Thanks Dad. I just don’t want you to think that…” Ben started but, Han cut him off.

“Look, son,” Han began. “I wasn’t all that great of a father to you growing up. And maybe I still won’t be. Hell, maybe I’ll be a shitty grandfather, too one day but, at least let me do this one thing I am good at and let me take over this one, little fucking contract for you. I can handle that much. You find some pictures you want to make, not just stupid projects you’re forced to make, and you take your time making things you believe in. Do some things that make you feel good. Meantime, you have your wedding and you build your home with your girl and…just…let me and your mother handle this. Alright?”

Ben glanced over at Rey and exhaled, thinking as he navigated the curving road.

“Just this once,” Han urged as Ben thought silently, his eyes forward as he drove. “Let me.”

“Besides, I do a few movies, I’ll get laid like crazy,” Han went on, interrupting the silence. “Your mother will be very thankful.”

“Alright, alright,” Ben shouted, interrupting Han’s train of thought. “Okay, I give. I give. Yeah, it would be awesome if you’d take over my contract Dad and thank you. I mean it. Thank you.”

“Yeah well, I love ya, kid. And I’d love to meet your girl some time.”
Ben stole another look at Rey who nodded at him silently.

“Yeah, okay, Dad. Next time she’s in town, we’ll set it up and have you over for dinner or something.”

“Sounds good, kid. See ya round.”

“Alright Dad, yeah. And hey, Dad. Thanks again.”

“Okay, kid. See ya later.”

*******

“Where do you want to go on our honeymoon?” Ben asked, his arms wrapped around Rey’s middle as they stood on the deck of the new house, vacant behind them while the February sun shined on them.

“Hmmm. I don’t know,” Rey replied thoughtfully, swaying beneath his hands laced over her own against her waist. “Maybe somewhere we can drive to. I am not looking forward to the flight tomorrow.”

“Santa Barbara? Oh! Or maybe wine country up north. Sonoma or Napa. Wait, you can’t drink while you’re pregnant. How about San Francisco?” Ben enthused.

“Anywhere or nowhere at all,” Rey sighed, watching the Pacific sparkle beyond the green hills around her. “As long as we’re together. Wherever you are, that’s where I want to be.”

*******

To: Finn, Poe, Rose, Gun, Paige

From: Rey

2:45 pm

Hi! I miss you people like cray cray! Had a sweet time with my man but I'll be back tomorrow. Have so much to fill you in on when I get there! I don’t know about y’all but, Chinese food sounds amazing to me lately. Tomorrow PM? I’m on CA time so, I’ll be ready for dinner by like 5, who’s in?
From Finn: Am I in? Is the Pope Catholic? Come home, girl! We missed you!

From Poe: Sounds delicious. I mean, amazing. LOL. Have a good flight, Reyrey.

From Paige: China Taste at me and Rosie’s and I’ll make sure she makes plum cake xoxo

From Rose: I just found the best sauce recipe for the plum cake I’ve been dying to make! Perfect! Love you Reyrey!

From Gun: I’ll be there, and I’ll bring some sake. Be safe, Rey.

From Rey: You guys are the besttttttttt <3 See you tomorrow PM.
Chapter Summary

One more chapter and an epilogue to go.

Two weddings, a baby, a move, and a couple surprises.

Artwork by the incredible @reylocalligraphy, who is basically the sweetest human on the planet.

Those of you still with me, you are the real MVPs. I adore you.

xo

Berry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m restless.

Things are calling me away.”
“My hair is being pulled by the stars again.”

- Anaïs Nin

There’s nothing quite as disorienting as waking in your man’s arms, sleep-warmed and tightly cuddled, only to find yourself stepping off an airplane thousands of miles away from him several hours later. It wasn’t even dinnertime yet, and Rey was already feeling depleted as she trudged through the airport.

Her rolling suitcase trailed behind, feeling far heavier than the allotted 50 pounds. Rey dragged it for all she was worth the last few steps to Poe’s waiting embrace.

“Welcome home!”

She tumbled gratefully into Poe’s arms as she slumped against his frame, thankful to stop carrying the solitude of traveling while nauseated. She could have cried with relief to see a friendly face as she pulled back from him, smiling wearily.

“Thanks,” she sighed blearily.

“You look spent!” Poe commented as he observed her with a sideways glance. He took the handle of her luggage from her as they headed for the parking garage. “Long flight?”

Rey nodded and hiked her bag further onto her shoulder.

It all looked so different from California as she stepped through the sliding glass doors.


Got it, she thought.

No green mountains, no pebble-packed shoreline or crashing, blue waves, no seagulls dipping from the cotton clouds against a bluebird sky met her as she stepped outside. Early Tennessee March looked like winter and Rey’s spring had already begun. She fought back the wave of emotions as her brain prodded her with Ben’s face, blinking in the back of her mind, and she felt a threat of tears build.

“Very long flight,” she agreed as she dropped into the passenger seat of Poe’s car. “Thanks so
much for picking me up, by the way.”

“No problem. You have a good time out there with your man?”

“The best,” she smiled. “Just the best time ever.”

“Good, good. Well, we’re glad to have you back, but I know it’s gotta be tough being apart like this. I give you guys lots of credit, Reyrey,” Poe said as he navigated them towards the airport exit. “I sure couldn’t do it.”

Her throat closed up painfully as she stared pointedly out the window, watching the bare tree branches as they drove.

Maybe it should’ve been validating, the assurance Poe didn’t feel capable of bearing separation from Finn the way Rey experienced it with Ben, but his sympathy made her heart lurch as she gulped down her feelings.

Everything was exactly as she had left it. The same fast food restaurants, storefronts and hotels she’d driven past for years still situated around familiar, winterscaped city blocks, but everything had changed, too. Traveling had taught her the world was larger than she’d known.

Half her heart resided elsewhere now.

Her eyes ticked the usual boxes as she recognized landmarks, but instead of feeling comfort, her traitorous heart grew bored.

“Rey?”

“Oh, sorry. What?”

“I said, have you heard about the wedding invitation snafu?”

“Oh, God. No! Sorry. Tell me about it.”
“Oh. My. God.”

“What?!”

“Girl. Girl! That ring!”

“A ring! Woman, you better tell me right now what this means!”

“You’re engaged? You’re getting married?!”

“Let me see! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, look at that rock!”

Poe hadn’t noticed her engagement ring when he retrieved Rey from the airport, but it took Rose, Paige and Finn approximately 0.02 seconds upon glimpsing her to identify the sparkling difference on her left hand. She grinned as her friends took turns grasping her fingers to inspect the ring as she presented her hand to them. They ogled the shiny gem appreciatively as they proclaimed over it.

“I’m getting married!” she announced, once she realized they’d already figured it out.

“Gorgeous,” Rose said decidedly.

“Somebody give me some sunglasses to shade my eyes from this blinding rock!” Finn joked.

“Our Benny did good,” Paige nodded proudly.

Only Gun smiled wordlessly, adding only a grunt as he winked at Rey.
“What did he say? What did he do?”

“Yeah, tell us! Tell us!”

Rey beamed as they swept her into a chair, and gathered while she recounted her proposal memories. Rose cooed adoringly and clicked her tongue with enjoyment at the details, Finn interrupted with questions and Paige snacked as she swung her crossed legs, a huge smile gracing her face, the satisfied grin of a big sister.

Everybody hugged her enthusiastically and passed around the cardboard take-out containers.

They scarfed down the Chinese food while she detailed what she deemed appropriate, sparing the juiciest tidbits. She skipped the part about Ben crawling atop her, eating her out before fucking her into the mattress and grunting into her ear of all the diamonds he would buy her, all the places he’d take her, all the ways he wanted to shower her with good things for the rest of her fucking life.

Among her friends where they lounged scattered around Rose and Paige’s living room, piles of Chinese food on paper plates balanced carefully in their laps, Rey finally breathed easily again, the first time since kissing Ben goodbye at LAX that morning.

She grinned around a mouthful of chow mein as she enjoyed the normal pleasure of eating a meal together, the food and company a welcome reprieve from her heart’s flip-flopping exhaustion.

“Poe told me about the wedding invites,” Rey began, hoping Finn would fill her in on his undoubtedly more theatrical and presumably funnier take on it.

“Oh my God, seriously. Peanut. Don’t even get me started. Like, for real. I cannot even with those jokers.”

“Yeah, don’t wind him up about it again,” Paige interjected. “We’ve already drunk about it. Trust me. You don’t even want to know.”

“Alright,” Rey chuckled, “but the wedding’s still set for May fourth, right?”

“May the fourth,” Finn nodded vigorously.
“May the fourth be with us all!” Poe raised a glass which everyone duplicated as they laughed.

“Cool.” Rey took a deep breath. “That’s great because I still need to get my dress fitted and it’s going to get tricky.” She lowered her eyes and concentrated on the bite as she scooped food into her mouth.

“Oh no, it’s fine, they’re very accommodating at the tailor’s shop,” Rose said.

“Yeah I mean, I’m sure they are. It’s just, I’m going to need some adjustments made to my dress.”

Finn stopped eating and lifted his eyes to meet hers from across the room, his brow furrowing lightly.

“We’ve only got two months, what are you planning on doing in two months time that will change your dress?”

“Well, ya know,” Rey said, taking another bite of her food thoughtfully. “I’ve got this little bun in the oven, and I’m going to get huge, I just know it.”

The room froze as all forks stopped moving and five sets of eyes landed squarely on Rey before falling to her belly and back to her face before the massive eruption Rey had been expecting arrived.

“Oh my God!”

“Holy shit!”

“Oh my God!”

“Holy shit!”

“Oh my God!”
Somewhere among the chorus of expletives and holy exclamations, there may have been a smattering of other sentiments but, Rey howled with laughter so loudly at their hysteria, she missed anything else that was shouted for at least five minutes.

“You’re fucking kidding me!”

“Nope,” she grinned, popping the last bite of an egg roll into her mouth. “Due September 25th! Baby Solo will be arriving!”

“Holy mother of Pete,” Finn breathed, leaning back into the couch cushions. “You’re gonna be a mom.”

Rey just smiled as she twirled noodles onto her fork and gleefully watched the information sink in for her friends.

“What’d Ben say?” Gun asked, piping up from his seat beside Rose.

“He was ridiculous. Thrilled. Adorable,” Rey said, a blush climbing her cheeks as she remembered his impassioned pride at his sexual prowess while making love to her. For all his gentle, adoring ovations, his manhandling of her in bed had made their sex life highly combustible over the prior week.

Who knew pregnancy was such an aphrodisiac?

“He’s very proud of himself, I’ll tell you that much. And, nearly beside himself lecturing me all the ways I need to take care of myself while he’s not with me. Researching car seats for the car…you know, generally losing his mind.”

“Lucky man,” Gun nodded, smiling as he tucked back into his plate. “I’m real happy for y’all, Rey.”

“Thanks, Gun.”

“Oh my God!” Poe interrupted. “You can name the baby Drum. Get it? Drum Solo?”
“Name the kid Dance! Come on, Reyrey, Dance Solo! You’ve got to, that would be so awesome.”

“I’ve got it!” Poe exclaimed. “Rock! I swear to God, Rey, I will give you $100 right now if you swear on a bible you will name the kid Rock Solo.”

“Poe,” Rey wheezed as she giggled at Poe and Finn, a hand on her belly as they offered increasingly more ridiculous baby names. “You are having way too much fun with this.”

“Guitar Solo!”

“Banjo! Didn’t some celebrity name their kid Banjo? You guys, he could be Banjo Solo!”

Whether it was the noodles or the conversation bubbling cheerily around her, Rey’s head swam as she placed a hand over her belly, feeling overfull and suddenly uncomfortable. Her smile waned while everyone around roared with laughter, rejoicing at her news. They moved from baby names to auntie and uncle monikers as Rey put her plate on the ground and took a deep breath to steady her tumbling insides.

“I want to be Auntie Ro.”

“Poe, you can be ‘Po-Po’ so, when the baby sees you we can all say ‘here comes the Po-Po.’”

“I’m Aunt Paiger. Or, maybe simply Paige, when the baby is older because you know. *Obviously,* I’m the cool aunt.”

“I call being Uncle Favorite. Or just Uncle Fave. It’s like Finn but, more adored.”

“Gun. Just Gun.”

“Rey,” Rose said, watching her from beside Gun where she was curled up giggling as they chatted. “Hey. You feeling okay?”
“Oh. Me?” Rey asked, raising her eyebrows slightly. “I’m fine, yeah. Just ate too much, I think. Not sure the baby likes Chinese food after all.”

“Are you sick?”

“Do you need to lay down?”

“Is the baby okay?”

“Do you need anything?”

“The baby’s okay, right?”

The rush of attention and hands leading her to recline, drink water, offer assistance and argue amongst themselves regarding what Rey and the baby needed grew louder around her as Rey’s head pounded, and her stomach lurched. Tears sprang to her eyes as she felt her resolve to travel alone, and handle these transitions without Ben descend on her.

This was so much to handle, how was she supposed to navigate this all alone?

For the first time in ages, she scrolled through the Rolodex of trusty sayings collecting cobwebs in her mind, reaching for a proverb to center her thoughts as the room spun out of her control and her body betrayed her with waves of discomfort.

Mind over matter.

Calm mind, healthy body.

Steady hand…handy heart.

No - hearty heart.

No - handy heart.

No - steady heart.

What is it again?
Once the tears spilled as she struggled to untangle her fuzzy thoughts, Paige reached for her and tugged her hand to standing while the group around them continued name negotiations.

“What’s wrong, little mama?” Paige asked quietly, as she draped an arm around her shoulder.

“I’m just tired, that’s all,” Rey sniffled. “Such a long day. Ya know?”

She dropped her head to Paige’s shoulder, and felt herself led to the bathroom. Once seated on the tub ledge, safely away from the ever-growing laughter in the room they’d vacated, Paige crouched at Rey’s feet, and offered her a handful of tissues.

“This is silly,” Rey confessed, feeling embarrassed by her flood of overwhelming emotions, wiping at her face. “I’m happy. Really I am,” she assured Paige, a fresh stream of tears cascading.

Paige cocked her head so sympathetically, Rey nearly couldn’t bear the compassion.

“Where’s your phone?” she asked.

“My purse,” Rey sniffled, blowing her nose. “By the front door.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Rey manually slowed her breathing and closed her eyes, picturing a wave of emotions in their intense barrage approaching, thinking of the Pacific as it lay below her mountain home in the Palisades. She visualized the tide sweeping the anxiety away, further and further from shore, desperate to calm her stomach and her heart rate. When she opened her eyes again, Paige was holding her iPhone.

“Here,” she instructed. “Call home.”

“But, I…” Rey began, confused. “Thank you,” she said with a smile as understanding dawned. She smiled as Paige left with a wink, closing the bathroom door behind her to give Rey a moment to
collect herself. She’d barely stepped down the hall when Rey dialed Ben’s number.

“Hey, beautiful.”

“Oh, Ben,” Rey sobbed, new tears leaping from her eyes at his voice.


“I’m fine, we’re fine,” she hurried to interrupt him. “I’m just overwhelmed,” she admitted, crying openly.

Ben listened while she detailed her lengthy travels, her conversations, her emotions and her distress, and finally her frustrations at being unable to maintain a facade of calm. She wasn’t used to being overruled by her feelings, she realized as she talked.

“This baby thinks it’s running things already, changing my life, and I feel overwhelmed. Like I could drown in sadness or anxiety or fear…all the things I need to get done, all the work I need to get accomplished. I can’t even figure out what I need to do or what I need to focus on first, Ben, and I miss you so much and I’m out here all alone and…”


“You’re not,” she wailed softly, emphatically shaking her head. “You’re so far away. I know, I flew that distance today and trust me, you are very far, far away from me.”

“Baby, I’m right there. With you.”

Rey breathed deeply and glanced at the ceiling, still struggling to see through her tears.

“Can you put me on speaker phone?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m all alone in the bathroom but…” she agreed and pressed speaker anyhow.
“Can you hear me?”

“Yes. I’m just sitting here in Rosie’s guest bathroom, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, crying like a crazy person.”

“Rey. I love you. Listen to me. Alright?”

“Okay,” she sighed. “I’m listening.”

“Baby,” he said gently, “this is Daddy.” Rey closed her eyes as she realized what was happening, and she held the phone away from her mouth further, sharing his voice, watching the screen.

“You hear me in there, little one? I miss you. I’m way out here, out by the ocean where you’re gonna grow up and feel sunshine all the time. Where your Mommy and I are gonna take you to build sandcastles and eat ice cream cones. And you’re gonna have a Mimi and a Papa and uncles and aunts and all the love we can give you. You’re gonna have a good life. I promise you. Such a good life, little one, and your Daddy can’t wait to give it all to you. But listen. I need you to take care of your Mommy for me. Can you do that? Tell her how pretty she is, just whisper it to her how breathtaking and good and smart she is. Once a day, if you can. I mean, you’re just a little baby, and this isn’t even your job, it’s mine, but can you help your old man out, and do me a solid?”

A smile found her lips as she listened, and her tears ceased.

“And baby, I promise, if you can do that for me - take good care of your Mommy while she’s with you, and I’m here getting our house ready - I promise, I’ll take over as soon as you get back. Okay? Can you do that for Daddy?”

Rey opened her eyes and rubbed her lower belly, her heart calming as she stood, and paced the small bathroom floor as she looked at the phone.

“I think the baby said ‘yes’.”

“Good baby,” Ben said, approvingly.
“Ben. Thank you.”

“Please don’t thank me, Rey. I should be with you right now. It sucks so badly I’m not. I feel super shitty about it.”

“Well, you do have a couple little things to do out there. Like sell a condo. And finish buying a house. And do the press for the indy.”

“I know, but still. You’re my priority. You and the baby.”

“It’s okay. I mean, we both have things to deal with. I have the shop, and the guys’ wedding coming up. Not to mention our wedding, and I have to move, and get ready for the baby to arrive, and…”

“Hey. One thing at a time, alright?”

“One thing at a time,” Rey repeated, exhaling hard.

“And baby doll, remember. I am with you. Right there. That’s my baby with you. You’re carrying me around with you everywhere you go. I’m with you. Okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled, rubbing her belly absently. “I love you.”

“Oh Rey, fuck. Baby, I love you like crazy.”

“I love you like a fat lady loves fudge.”

“I love you like a duck loves bread.”

“I love you like a kid loves Christmas.”
“I love you like Kanye loves Kanye.”

Rey snorted, signaling to Ben he had won that round.

“Call me later?” he asked.

“K. Mwah,” she called, sealing her call with a kiss before hanging up.

Tending her face in the mirror, she tucked her hair behind her ears, straightening her shoulders as she gazed into her bloodshot eyes.

“C’mon, baby,” she said resolutely. “We can do this.”

*Steady of heart, and stout of hand,* she remembered.

The mantra scrolled through her head calmly, greeting her with rationality as she opened the bathroom door and rejoined her friends.

**********

For days after her arrival back to the North Shore, Rey worked diligently at Resistance, greeting customers, making sales and rentals, answering the phones. Only when she was putting her feet up at night, propped in Finn’s lap while she scrolled through her phone while lounging on her couch did it occur to her she could see a swell below her navel.

A pint of ice cream later, after Finn took a selfie with her to mark the occasion, posting it online, and texting Ben a copy, was she aware of the pinching sadness nagging at her as she sat beside her best friend.

In all the years they’d been friends, she’d never lived more than ten minutes from Finn.

This transition into married life would be a huge one, and her heart swelled with love and grief as Finn’s face contorted with glee as he watched comments roll in on his popular Instagram account.
“Ya know,” she said, licking a final swipe of strawberry cheesecake ice cream off her spoon as she deposited it inside the sink, “we have to figure out what to do about the Resistance.”

She’d been unsure what to do with the shop ever since Finn and Poe announced their intentions to move to Texas a couple months earlier. Once she and Ben decided to settle in California, and she returned to Tennessee, the impermanence of it all began to feel imminent.

What had always been a secure, little corner of the world where she could relax was becoming the scene of ever-increasing dramatic scenes as Finn bid adieu to customers, videos, and mementos. His flair for the theatrical extended to his relationships with the clientele, so Rey was used to his big entrances and fantastic send-offs, but lately, she was reduced to tears or doubled in laughter daily.

In five weeks he would be married, and soon after a Texan.

The time to decide what was to become of Resistance Video was upon them.

“Yeah, I know,” Finn said, leaning against the cabinets, his thick arms crossed across his chest as he nodded in agreement. “Big decision. What are you gonna do?”

“Well, I was hoping we could decide together. You know. Co-owners and all that.”

“Hmm,” Finn hummed as he walked slowly back to the couch.

Rey sat beside him, perched with her knees tucked under herself to watch him think. She had a pretty good idea what she was about to suggest, but she knew Finn would acquiesce to her if he didn’t have his say first.

She waited while he rubbed his chin, considering the options while Rey smirked at his familiar gesture, treasuring his everyday movements even as she prepared to be parted from him.

“We could sell it. Or rent it out. Or, hell, even keep it and refurbish it. You know? Like an Airbnb we use when we come back and see the gang here in Tennessee. Might make a good chunk of change doing that, huh?” he asked.
Rey nodded and waited as he continued.

“Although, it might be more trouble than it’s worth in the long run.”

“Maybe,” Rey shrugged, attentive to his thought process.

“I don’t know how many people actually want to rent a weird, little building off the beaten path in the North Shore of Chattanooga for kicks.”

Rey nodded.

“Or, how many people would want to buy it, for that matter, considering how shitty a location it really is, anyhow, come to think of it.

“I don’t know…” he trailed off. “Seems weird to make money off it, in a way. Ya know? He was your Uncle John who left it to you, after all, Peanut. We didn’t even buy the place, he just gave it to you. And you let me elbow my way in on it.”

“You didn’t elbow your way in,” Rey insisted, playfully shoving his shoulder. “You bought half the inventory. That was a huge investment. I want you to get your money’s worth.”

“I appreciate that, but I don’t know what to do here. What do you think we oughta do? Because frankly, I can’t figure it out, and I have thought and thought about it. Like, lay-in-bed-awake-at-night thought about it.”

Rey took a deep breath.

“Okay, well. I do have one, maybe-decent idea,” she said. “Tomorrow, I want you to come with me and see if it’s a good one.”

“Awesome,” he said, his tone animated with a flush of relief. “Thank God. One way or another, we’re both outta here in a couple months and we can’t just go leaving a weird, little building with a purple door, and a stockpile of unwanted VHS tapes lying around.”
“My dear child,” Maz said, looking from Rey to Finn, and back again as she processed their offer. “Are you serious?”

Rey smiled as Finn leaned forward, elbows leaning on the desk as he scooted closer, his eyebrows knit in concentration.

“I’m serious,” Rey assured her, nodding firmly. “I think it’s a fair deal, and I want to leave the North Shore knowing it’s in good hands.”

“I’m...I’m speechless, frankly,” Maz said, pushing her oversized glasses further up the bridge of her nose. “I had no intention of leaving the North Shore or course, but I had drawn up some plans hoping to expand at some point, maybe rent a place down the street, but this? This is...it’s...it’s…” she stuttered.

“It would be a big help to us,” Finn interjected. “We’ll both be heading out to parts unknown. I’m moving to Texas with my fiance once we’re married to be near family, and Rey is moving to California to be with her baby daddy. It would be a big help to us if we could keep this hand-off small, sort of informal. Get things done quickly.”

“And, I’d love to see you expand the business, Maz,” Rey added. “I’ve always loved you and Kaydel and the shop. Feels right to sell to you and know the North Shore will have another location to get a good cup of coffee.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Maz said, leaning back at her desk, her chair squeaking as she twisted and daydreamed momentarily. “I’d like to explore my brand, a bit. Broaden my horizons, as they say. A little cafe, perhaps. Or a cantina, even,” she mused, dreamily.

“Well, whatever you come up with, that’s the price we are prepared to accept. And not a penny more,” Rey assured her.

“But, Rey!” Maz countered, serious, bringing her feet beneath her chair abruptly. “That’s not enough money. I’m serious, it’s just not sufficient. You could make double that selling commercial real estate through an agent with a listing.”

“Maz,” Finn announced, a palm flat on her desk. “We’re sure. We know what we want, and we just
hope it’s what you want, too.”

“You’ve kept us going with caffeine all these years, Maz. Let us keep you going for a little bit now,” Rey said.

“You know, in a small way this sort of makes sense. You can’t outlive love, and you can’t outlove life,” the old woman reflected. “I can’t thank you enough. Both of you.”

Rey grinned and glanced at Finn in amusement while she embraced the tiny woman who came around the desk, her strong, small hands yanking Rey into an exuberant hug.

“You too, young man,” Maz announced, tugging Finn into her arms.

“Come on,” she opened the door of her office, leading them towards the bar. “Let’s have a drink. Something stiff to celebrate for the groom and I. I think I have some chocolate milk for you maybe, mama-to-be.”

**********

To: Ben
From: Rey

I miss you.
Have I told you I miss you yet today? God, Ben, I. Miss. U.
I miss you so much, it’s distracting. I need your body, your soul, your scent, your heart right here beside me all the time.

This babe is making my brain mush. Do you know I almost packed my engagement ring in a box today? THIS is the level of scatterbrained we are dealing with, future-husband. Wait.

I have regret telling you that.

Sorry?

I will not accidentally pack my ring.
Or our child.

I love you like a cowboy loves his hat.
And then some.

xoxo

To: Rey

From: Ben

hey, beautiful.

I miss you so much, it’s fucking unhealthy.

I ate two double cheeseburgers today. Why? I ran 15 miles.

It’s making me crazy being away from you two. Why? You’re the loves of
my life. COME HOME, your man NEEDS you.

I will unpack boxes VERY carefully once you get here.

Thank Christ the baby’s in your belly, safe and sound, no worry you’ll
pack it. I love you. I miss your tits so goddamn much.

I’m spending alot of time in the shower taking care of how
much I miss you.

And going to meetings every day.

I love you like a fish loves water and I hope you are wet, too.
Fuck.
Off to the shower again.

To: Ben

From: Rey

I’ll be at the airport to pick you up at 1am!

Are you kidding? Nothing could keep me away!

Gun can fight me! I want my fiance! ASAP!
Get here, mister!

I love you I love you I love you!

xoxo
To: Rey

From: Ben

About to take off. Turning off phone.
Can’t wait to fuck you in your bridesmaid’s dress.
Pat the tummy for me, tell my angel Daddy’s on his way.

I love you

*********

Chapter End Notes

other things I've been writing instead of tackling The North Shore & True North endings...

This work...Heartstruck, and this one...lock the door, drop the key, and this one...nevermind I'll find someone like you.
Radiance

Chapter Summary

For the most gracious and steadfast and deserving of all readers on Earth. I hope this has been worth the wait. Epilogue Next Monday, December 17, 2018.
xoxox with all my thanks and love,
Berry

Chapter Notes

moodboard by the precious and generous @atchamberlin
“What is life without the radiance of love?”

- Friedrich Schiller

Gun’s property had never looked so beautiful.

The huge white tent parked at the edge of his acreage sparkled with ropes of twinkling lights. Magnolia-heavy bouquets anchored every surface in sight.

Cars lined the long, gravel drive under canopies of maple trees, and a jazz band wailed into the night air as they promised to love one another eternally. The grooms had kissed, danced and toasted the wedding guests for hours, long after the Tennessee spring sun had set.
“Congratulations, Pop,” Rey had grinned as she pulled Poe by the lapels. She kissed his cheek and tossed her head back with laughter as he groaned and threw his hands in the air.

“Pop!” he whined. “That damn wedding invite misprint! I will never live this down!”

“You really won’t,” Ben smiled. He tugged Poe into an embrace, more a back-beating competition than a hug, and gripped his arms as he stepped back. “Have a great trip.”

“Finn,” Rey sniffled, “Peanut, I...I...” Her hormones were a raging mess. It was the most important day of her best friend’s life, and she was having trouble getting through a single thought without weeping. Ben’s hand at the small of her back helped.

“It’s okay, little mama,” Finn said, wrapping Rey in a bear hug. “I know you love me.”

“I do,” she cried into his tuxedo jacket, tears flooding the stiff suit material. “I really do.”

“See, Ben? She’s ready for your wedding,” he smirked, exchanging his hug with Rey for one with her fiance.

“Congratulations,” Ben said, taking Finn’s hand as Rey wiped her eyes. “So happy for you two.” Poe’s arm landed around his new husband’s shoulders as Rey dabbed at her face, unable to stop the water works.

“This is so frustrating,” she said through tears, looking through bleary eyes to Finn and then to Ben. “I can’t stop crying, but I’m so happy,” she wailed. “I promise.”

“Come on, beautiful,” Ben said, hiding his grin with a kiss at her temple. “Come over here with me.”

He pulled a white chair from beneath Table 16 and sat beside Rey, pulling her tired feet into his lap. Kicking his black patent leather lace-ups aside, he dropped Rey’s high heels into the thick, green grass and rubbed his thumbs into her soles.

She slunk into the chair and sighed, hands lacing over her small tummy.

“Man of my dreams,” she murmured, eyes closing as Ben massaged her aching arches with strong thumbs.

“You looked amazing today,” he said as he pulled all the ache from her feet.

She smiled at him. “You did, too.”

Ben Solo in street clothes was good, in and of itself.

Ben Solo in a tux was otherworldly.

Ben Solo in a tux, rubbing her feet? Rey was speechless. No adjective on Earth could ever describe what she could still scarcely believe.


“I feel like a whale.”
“You look good enough to eat.” Her cheeks heated as his fingers moved up her ankle, rubbing at her calf as she nestled her toes along his zipper.

“Careful, baby doll,” he muttered as his gaze darkened. Rey chuckled as she pressed her arching foot against the seam of his tux pants as he raised an eyebrow. “Fucking dangerous.”

“So,” Rose said, approaching with arms full of bridesmaids’ bouquets. “Who wants to take flowers home?”

Ben straightened in his chair as Rey slid her foot from his lap. She smirked at him as he winked.

“You take them, Rosie. Or decorate Gun’s place. I’m trying not to accumulate anything while we pack.”

Okay,” Rose said, slumping into a chair between them. “Oh, that just made me sad.” Rose dropped her head in Rey’s lap as Paige and Gun collapsed into chairs around the table. She ran her fingers through Rose’s updo, dropping bobby pins into a pile on the table while Ben yawned.

“Drink this,” Paige said, handing Rose an open bottle of champagne. “Instant sadness antidote.”

Rose tipped the bottle back and took a swig, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. She leaned around Rey to hand it to Gun who took a drink before pitching it into the oversized trash can the caterers had brought.

“Y’all need a bottle of water,” he said to Ben and Rey, standing before they could stop him.

“Thanks, Gun,” Rey said, draining half before resuming her work on Rose’s hair sprayed updo. She worked her fingers through the strands and relished the cooling evening.

Cleaning out the Resistance, packing her apartment, and helping prepare for the wedding had made the past month a constant hamster wheel of activity. The demands of the pregnancy in addition to the upcoming move to California found Rey falling into bed every night. She’d waddle home from The Resistance, drop onto the couch, asleep before her eyes closed, and wake when Ben called around 9 pm.

Politely navigating wedding guests who were shocked Kylo Ren was at Poe and Finn’s Tennessee countryside wedding depleted the last drops of her energy. They’d smiled, selfie’d and handled the affair since sunrise. She combed lazily through Rose’s hair as the band packed up and Gun yanked his tie free.

“Ro, let’s head inside and go to bed.”

Rose lifted her head and tears welled as she looked between Gun and Rey. “But…but…”

“C’mon, woman,” he said, standing to take her hand. “You’re tired.”

Rose stood and wiped a tear and sniffled as she took Gun’s hand. “You comin, Paiger? Guest room’s ready.”

“Why not?” Paige asked, standing slowly.

“Night,” Rey said as Rose leaned to kiss her hair. She was in no mood to hurry. She felt a thousand pounds and her shoes had bitten into the swollen meat of her pregnant feet all day.

“Night, guys. Be safe heading out,” Gun called.
“Ready?”

Ben took her hand and she leaned her head on his shoulder as they left the huge tent. Heels dangled from her fingertips as he bent to scoop her into his arms, and she curled against his chest as her chiffon dress trailed the gravel. The rental car purred to life as Ben headed to the North Shore and Rey fell asleep as soon as his hand rested warm on her thigh.

***********

When a text came through at sunrise on the morning of May the fifth, Ben threw the phone against the wall.

“Buy you a new one,” he muttered into the nape of her neck. Her eyes never even opened.

***********

By lunchtime, the apartment was bright enough to wake Rey. She sat stretching on the side of the bed and smiled at the wild, dark hair curled on the pillow beside hers. He was face-down on the bed, thick muscles under pale skin lifting peacefully as he slept.

Rey fell back into bed and rolled over, tossing a leg over his as he stirred.

“Mfm.”

“Hmm?” she whispered, tucking hair behind his ear. She leaned to press a kiss to his shoulder and rubbed his calf with her bare toes.

“Time is it?”

“No idea.”

He rolled over to face her, and pulled her against his chest as the sheets fell to his waist. “C’mere. Haven’t gotten to do this in forever.”

She groaned as she slotted into place beside him, tucked into his sleepy heat safely. A bubble erupted in her lower belly, knocking like a polite wave at her abdomen. She grabbed Ben’s hand and twisted it over her belly.

“Feel,” she whispered as he met her eyes. Surprise registered as he woke and his eyes lit when the bubbling knocked against his hand. Rey grinned widely and watched as a slow smile spread across his lips.

“Is that...is it...?”

“Yeah,” she smiled as he pressed harder at the kicks. “That’s our baby.”

“Oh my God.” Reverence washed over his face as he pulled back to watch his hand. “Get rid of this,” he said, tugging Rey’s shirt above her belly as she giggled.

She leaned to watch Ben as he stared, nose to her belly, mesmerized at her skin as it shifted. Her fingers ran through his hair as she watched his fascination, and she smiled when he looked up at her, tired eyes and brilliant joy in his features.
“This is unreal. I mean, it’s amazing. And bizarre. Rey, you have another human person inside your body. Right now. A separate human being is inside your skin with you…” He trailed off, staring back at her belly as it jumped again. “I’m speechless.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?” She pulled his hair to the back of his neck and watched as he traced a pattern on her belly with tender fingers.

“Unbelievable. You’re growing a baby.” He met her eyes again and Rey felt her heart swell. Waiting through pregnancy alone was maybe worth it to see this level of wonder on his face.

“Your baby,” she said.

“My baby.”

He reached to kiss her as the heat between them cranked up, pausing only when the baby between them demanded she empty her bladder. “Bad news, husband. Need to take a bathroom break.”

Ben sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Guess I’d better get used to the bean cramping my style.”

“Back in a jif.” She hopped out of bed with renewed fervor and called to him as she stepped around boxes lining the hallway. “Want to find your family some food, handsome?”

“On it,” he called as she heard the bed creak and his jeans zip as he headed for the kitchen.

“Climb back in that bed and put that kid back to sleep. I’ll bring you some tea.”

*********

Finn had already claimed his take of the videos at Rey’s insistence by the time he left for his honeymoon. He’d cleaned her out of Paul Newman, Montgomery Clift and James Dean movies, and carefully peeled the autographed Kylo Ren poster from the wall opposite the register and rolled it up.

“For posterity,” he’d said as Rey raised an eyebrow. “What? You know what he looks like, you’re gonna live with the man.”

Cases and boxes sat half-filled around the quiet storefront as Rose and Gun sorted videos with Ben and Rey, and they talked around greasy pizza as they organized.

“Humphrey Bogart. Yay or nay?” Rose asked, holding up Casablanca.

“Stay!” Rey squealed, reaching to drop it into her California box.

“Who’s this…” Gun said, reading the spine of a box, “James Cagney? Who’s that?”

“Noir,” Ben said, tearing a bite from his slice as Rey nodded. “Leave it.”

“Julie Andrews?” Rose asked, handing Mary Poppins and The Sound of Music to Rey who nodded emphatically.

“What about this?” Gun smirked, holding up a Cosmic Battles film. Ben’s parents stared back from inside the plastic case as he rolled his eyes and waved it away.

“Next,” he muttered, shoving the crust into his mouth.
The front door chimed and Paige blew in, shaking rain from her umbrella as she slammed it closed again. “Cats and dogs out there,” she said as she dropped the umbrella and her purse at the counter, landing cross-legged amongst the packing boxes and pizza. “What can I do to help?”

“Tape,” Rose said, handing her a roll of thick masking tape. Paige grabbed a slice of pizza and kicked off her shoes as she got started strapping boxes closed while they sifted movies into piles around the emptying space.

“So empty,” Rey said, looking around as the bare bookshelves stared at them. The room swallowed up sound, echoing faintly as they all sat looking around. Most of the inventory would be donated to a film library in California, and Rey and Ben would move most of their haul into the new house in the Palisades.

One day, Rey could decide what to do with the remnants of the Resistance, but for now it was all pieced off and handed out. Tears climbed her throat and she laid a hand over her belly as Paige pulled her close.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just choked up. Ya know? This has been my home for so long and now....” She glanced around the blank walls and chipped paint peeling at the ceiling. It wasn’t much, but it had been all hers.

“Now you have a new home,” Paige said, raising her eyebrows as Rey met her eyes and wiped a tear. “Right?”

“And we’ll be there to help you get settled,” Rose said, reaching to pat her knee.

“Shouldn’t take me and Solo more than two days, three at the most to get Rey’s new car and the trailer to L.A.” Gun said. “Agreed?” He glanced at Ben who nodded in agreement.

“Sounds right to me. Won’t even need to stop for the night, just push on through and grab some grub on the way.”

“You sound like a couple of long-distance truckers,” Rose said as Rey laughed.

Ben smirked and shrugged, leaning back on his palms, long legs crossed at the ankles on the thin carpet. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I don’t want you guys dozing off and getting in an accident,” Rey said, adjusting as her hips ached on the ground. “You gotta promise to pull over if you get sleepy.”

“Promise,” Ben winked. “We’ll be too busy telling war stories and having belching competitions. Don’t worry.”

“Oh, brother.” Rose rolled her eyes and looked at Rey as Gun and Ben high fived. “Thank God you and I are flying first class. That’s too far to road trip with those two.”

“You know what they say,” Ben said. “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

“And so, we go together,” Rose said, standing. “Who wants homemade ice cream? I’ve got lemon chiffon and strawberry swirl at home.”

Paige stood and pulled Rey to her feet with both hands. “Come on, Reyrey. Time to dry your tears.
We gotcha.”

*********

It wasn’t the last time Rey cried in the Resistance, or the last time she and Rose rolled their eyes at Gun and Ben’s bromance as they prepared to help Rey move cross-country. She handed Maz the keys and wrapped an arm around the new owner as they stood on the sidewalk.

“The purple door always reminded me of a preschool,” Maz said as they stood studying the empty building.

Rey smiled and blinked back tears as she cleared her throat. “Me too.”

Maz wrapped her own arm around Rey’s waist and winked up at her through Coke bottle glasses in the June sunshine. “I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“There’s Grandma,” Rey told her tummy as she walked into the Resistance for the last time alone. She looked up at the princess in blazing white on the poster behind the register. “She will probably be your favorite person in the whole world. She’s sure one of mine.”

The empty building trembled as Ben walked through the door and surveyed the empty room.

“‘Bout ready, baby doll?”

Rey tugged the poster from the wall as paint flaked onto the tape, and rolled it as she looked around.

Arms folded over her chest, she turned slowly as her gaze fell over every wall, every corner of the building her Uncle John had left for her, the last concrete piece of her sad childhood standing vacant. Her fiancé curled around her back as she spun to face him, and the tenderness she found in his eyes fueled her to her core.

“Let’s go home.” She nodded as her eyes shined with nervous hope and bittersweet memories, and Ben Solo took her hand.

And Rey Lowood left the North Shore.

*********

To: Ben
From: Rey
11:17 am

I’m belted, pottied & Rosie is next to me.
Baby is good, ready to taxi.

To: Rey
From: Ben
11:17 am

Good girl. I was waiting to hear.

To: Ben
From: Rey
11:18 am

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE be careful driving!!!

To: Rey
From: Ben
11:20 am

Baby doll, do not worry. Gun & I have nothing but open road, Garth Brooks CDs and beef jerky. We’ll be fine.

To: Ben
From: Rey
11:21 am

Rosie says if Gun snores, nudge him and he’ll stop.

To: Rey
From: Ben
11:23 am

Not a chance.
From: Rey
11:24 am

I love you. I miss you. I am done being apart from you.

To: Rey
From: Ben
11:25 am

This is it, beautiful. No more goodbyes. You’re all mine now.

To: Rey
From: Ben
11:26 am

That sounded creepier than I intended.

To: Ben
From: Rey
11:27 am

Me and the baby will be waiting at home in California for you.

To: Rey
From: Ben
11:29 am

Sweetest words on Earth. I love you, Rey. I’m gonna marry you.

To: Ben
From: Rey
11:30 am

Not if I marry you first. Turning off phone. I love you, Ben.
To: Rey  
From: Ben  
11:32 am  
I’m on my way, baby. Have a safe flight.

***********

“Holy mother of Pete.”

Rose’s mouth hung open as she took in the landscape from Rey and Ben’s backyard. Standing on the back deck, surrounded by lush green hillside above the mouth of the endless Pacific Ocean, Rey bit her lip and grinned as she watched her friend take it all in.

“I know. Right?”

Rose met her eyes, slack-jawed and shook her by the arms. “Are you even kidding me right now?” she laughed. “This is incredible! This is the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen! This is amazing! This is...this is a movie star walking into your backyard...oh my God, I am such a huge, huge fan!”

She stumbled past Rey to clasp hands with Leia who chuckled a greeting to Rose while Rey watched. Her friend fell all over herself while Leia winked at Rey over the top of her head, and Rey leaned close to hug her fiance’s mother.

“Welcome home.”

“Thanks,” Rey said, smiling as she placed a hand over her tummy absently.

“Welcome home, nugget,” Leia said, leaning to speak to Rey’s tummy. “Let’s feed the mommy, shall we?”

She looped an arm through Rey’s and headed through the house, bypassing the bare kitchen Ben hadn’t bothered to stock well before heading to Tennessee.

“I know where all the best mess is in this town,” she told Rey and Rose as she led them to her car. “Let’s go find some trouble.”

***********

It was late when he finally crawled into bed beside Rey in their new home.

The trip had taken almost four days, and the traffic on the final leg had kept them from getting home far past the time they’d predicted.

Rose’s grilled steaks and mashed potatoes with rosemary were sealed and saved as leftovers, and Rey had finally slunk to bed disappointed around eleven.
“You’re home!” Rey rubbed her eyes viciously as she blinked to be sure it wasn’t a dream.

“Finally,” he said, tugging jeans off his legs and throwing them to the floor. “Last hundred miles I think I flew. Couldn’t wait to get home to my girls.”

They melted into one another and Ben’s arms laced around her middle as he laid his head on her chest.

“Home,” he whispered as he moved a hand over her belly.

“Home.”

***********

Gun and Rose spent their four days of LA sightseeing in the backseat of Ben’s convertible living the California life, and Rey never wanted it to end.

They feasted on carne asada burritos from a taco truck and collected shells on Balboa Island and shared cotton candy at Disneyland while the girls wore Minnie Mouse ears. Every night, Gun and Ben would arm wrestle or play foosball or construct a high stakes game of X-box, and Rey and Rose would dip their toes in the pool and discuss baby names and bridesmaids dresses.

Finn and Poe were in Texas already, and Paige was in New York on a girls’ trip with other teachers, and Rey was loathe to let Rose head home to Tennessee just yet.

“Can’t you stay just a little longer?” she’d beg, pouting at Rose while Gun sighed and Ben smirked and patted her toosh. “Please? Just another day? Or two? We can go to Malibu! You haven’t seen Malibu! Or go hiking! We haven’t gone hiking yet, and I know you would love it, Gun!”

Ben kissed her shoulder as she looked down at him from where she sat in his lap. “I just don’t want you to leave. Ever,” she said.

Finally, Rey sent Rose and Gun to the airport with Ben while she sobbed and ate leftovers in front of the fridge. Her face was scrubbed clean and she smiled when he came home alone, but her heart ached all the same.

***********

“I have an idea,” Ben said as they walked the neighborhood hills. Rey huffed as she pumped her arms, working to keep up with her long-legged fiance as they climbed.

“Oh yeah?” she huffed. “Tell me about it.”

Luckily for Rey, Ben carried the conversation for twenty minutes while she sweated and marched her pregnant self up and down the steep Pacific Palisades roads. The vets he’d worked with for years were near and dear to his heart, and Rey loved him for it. Any success he had, he attributed to the team, not only himself, even if he was the headlining star. When he laid out his plan for a non-profit organization that he and Gun had kicked around on their four-day road cross-country road trip, Rey’s brow furrowed.
“You’re going to do all this by yourself?” she asked when he drew a breath. “Help armed service vets find personal security or stunt double or grip and lighting jobs, yourself? All of Hollywood...that’s a lot of work for one handsome man to handle, Ben Solo, no matter how amazing you are.”

“No, I'd...I’d have my wife, who I hope will be at least a little interested in helping,” he said, meeting her eye as they walked down a hill. Rey reached for his hand and smiled.

“Of course, I’ll help. I’d love it. This sounds amazing. You’re built for this, Ben. Really. But, we’re having a baby in a minute. Can we really do both? At the same time?”

“I may have another idea,” he said as he raised her knuckles to his lips for a kiss. “Trust me. You’ll like it.”

***********

“We’re gathered here today to witness the marriage of two beautiful souls, Ben and Rey,” Malaak said. His hands met at his belt, ramrod straight and shoulders back as he spoke more loudly than Rey knew he was capable of.

“Do you have the rings?” Mal asked as Leia sniffled from the front row. She dabbed at her eyes as Rey grinned at her from beneath her short veil blowing in the breeze through their backyard. The Pacific blue backdrop sparkled brightly behind Ben’s dark eyes in the California summer sunshine, and Han handed him Rey’s wedding band with a smirk.

“Break a leg, kid,” he whispered as he slugged Ben’s shoulder and took Leia’s hand as he sat beside her. Finn reaches to pat Leia’s back as Paige took Rey’s bouquet and Rose snapped photos from beside Gun.


When he took her hands, their friends fell silent. The green hills surrounding their house held their breath, the baby in her belly stilled, and the waves calmed enough that Rey heard every syllable as Ben looked into her eyes and spoke.

“Rey Lowood, you are my shining star. My living comet. You shot across my path like a meteor, brighter than a supernova, and you wrecked my world. Really, more like you splashed coffee down the front of my shirt,” he chuckled as everyone giggled.

“You lit up every, single corner of my world like daylight. Like all my life I’d been living in black and white and suddenly, someone turned on the Technicolor. I love you. God, I love you so much,” he laughed. “You’ve given me a reason to move forward, inspiration to make a difference...and now, you’ve given me a family,” he said as he glanced at her belly under the white fabric of her dress.

“I can’t wait to be your husband forever and ever. I love you with all my heart.”

Rose snapped a photo as Poe bit back a whimper in his chair, and Leia reached back to pat his knee beside Finn.

“Ben,” Rey began, searching his eyes. “You are my Prince Charming and my Gilbert Blythe. My George Bailey and my Rhett Butler. My Mr. Darcy, my Mr. Rochester and my Heathcliff. You’re my Han Solo, and my Max DeWinter and my Captain Von Trapp and my Kylo Ren. You’re my
muse and my song, you’re my midnight and my sunrise.”

She smiled as Rose whispered a gasp and laid a hand over her heart and Gun reached to take her hand.

“I never knew love like the movies existed in real life. I’d seen it enough times though, and when it hit me...it hit me.” She giggled as everyone laughed softly.

“I’d watched enough love stories to know what to look for and God - Ben, when I first laid eyes on you...I saw love. It's you. You’re my love. My happily ever after. It’s here, right here with you. Forever.”

Bands slid onto fingers as Mal grinned and nodded, and they kissed far too long as the small crowd of their family whooped loudly enough the neighbors came to watch.

“I love you, Rey Solo,” Ben murmured against her lips as he tugged her off her feet.

“I love you back, husband,” she whispered as he swung her into a circle.

The sky turned violet and the sparkling water flowed freely, and by midnight every, single wedding guest was inside the pool in their finery. Paige waved goodbye with Rey’s bouquet as Mal left with her over his shoulder on his way out the door around midnight, and Ben rolled his eyes as his father goosed his mom as they left shortly after.

Somewhere over Tennessee, it was sunset.

The North Shore would be closing up shop for the day, and Rey Solo fell asleep in her wedding dress beside the movie star she’d collided with on a sidewalk, far away on the shore of a new life, with friends old and new, and a happy ending she had written and directed all for herself.

*******
Dawn

Chapter Notes

moodboard by the incomparable @rileybabe, as always. My faithful friend and sister,
thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Epilogue

“The dawn is not distant, nor is the night starless; Love is eternal
Dawn arrived.

Rey had felt strange the night before, achy like she had the flu and exhausted from fighting a backache, but she followed Ben into their bedroom and fell asleep quickly. When she woke to a band of tight pain around her huge belly, intense cramps like a five-alarm fire in her uterus, she blew a firm exhale into their quiet room and waited for relief.

“Ben.” She whispered against his shoulder as she flipped on the bedside lamp. “Babe. Ben. Wake up.”

“Mmmmmmff.” He hadn’t moved a muscle one moment and the next, his eyes sprung open and he bolted out of bed, wild-eyed and frantic. Rey blinked at him lazily while he stood, fingers splayed wide as he stared down at her.


“Oh my God,” she said, watching him freak out with an amused shake of her head. “Calm down. I don’t know - maybe? I just…”

Another spasm gripped her as she doubled over, holding her breath as the contraction seeped through her abdomen. The quick climb, the lengthy, sustained ache, the slow descent. Ben’s hand was in hers, fingertips red when she looked down to release his fingers.

“I should be timing these,” he said, glancing at the time on the bedside clock as she gripped his forearm. Getting out of bed was a science lately, and Ben was used to helping hoist her to the ground. This time though, her water broke as soon as she stood and her eyes flew to his.

“Oh my God,” said the anesthesiologist as he patted Rey’s knee, bare where the hospital gown had tugged it exposed after he finished placing her epidural. Tears filled her fearful eyes as Ben wrapped an arm around her where she sat on the edge of the bed.

She’d pushed for two hours, but the baby’s head was wedged too tightly, they’d said, and her heart
rate kept dropping during Rey’s contractions. A cesarean was the smartest course of action, but Rey’s heart sunk anyway.

“Big headed Solo men,” Leia had whispered, wiping sweaty tendrils from Rey’s flushed cheeks as she collapsed back against the pillows. Ben had asked questions, following the doctor around the room as he washed his hands and smiled sympathetically.

“All first time fathers are the same, Mr. Solo,” he’d said. “The nurse will get you some scrubs and we’ll get your wife comfortable in the O.R. We won’t start the final act till you’re beside her. I promise.”

Only when she heard the baby’s squall as she laid in the freezing cold operating room, somehow shocking even if Rey had grown the baby in her body for nine months, could she relax. She watched Ben’s face as he gazed at the activities beyond the surgical blankets, thinking how in love he looked, how well she knew that smitten look in his eyes, and she welcomed it when he leaned over to kiss her.

“She’s so beautiful, baby. You are amazing,” he whispered as he laid his forehead against hers.

“She’s so beautiful, baby. You are amazing,” he whispered as he laid his forehead against hers.

“Dawn,” Rey said as the sun streamed through the private hospital windows hours later as she held the bundle in her arms. She snuggled the baby as Ben pulled her closer where she sat curled under his arm in her hospital bed, a content and tired trio smooshed together blissfully.

“Yes,” he said, gently tracing her tiny hand with a huge finger as he reclined beside his girls in the small bed. “Dawn.”

When the baby’s grandfather visited, Leia crossed her arms against her chest as he smirked down at the sleeping baby.

“Sorta sounds like Han,” he gloated.

“Oh, brother,” Leia rolled her eyes.

The nursery at home was peaceful neutrals and organic fabrics, a sole piece of artwork framed to draw the eye. An artistic touch, a bit of irony, one motto Rey would have to tweak one day when Dawn was old enough to read the words and understand the princess in the picture was actually Grandma, gracing the wall opposite the crib in the baby’s room at home.

“A woman’s place is where ever she wants it to be,” Rey would tell her someday, just as the princess had taught her once. For now, Rey was content to rock her in the chair Ben had researched and picked out, or smile from the doorway as her husband snoozed with a sleeping infant on his chest.

Sometimes she was thankful to nurse the baby just to have a chance alone with her. She’d prop up in bed and Ben would curl beside her hip, a hand possessively wound around her hips in his sleep.

“Love my girls,” he’d murmur as Rey sat lazily caressing her daughter’s cheeks during the night. Long lashes on pale, cherry blossom cheeks, a rosebud mouth and milky skin, Dawn was a cherub on Earth, and Rey was in love. Dark hair framed her iridescent blue eyes and chubby fists swung from precious, chunky arms. Everyone who saw her fought to have a turn, but Rey knew she’d always belong to her.

“I’ve never had someone of my very own,” she’d said to Ben as she sat nursing on the couch while winter crawled through California, her bright-eyed infant daughter gazing into Rey’s eyes as she tugged her mama’s chestnut braid.
“You have me,” he said, taking the baby over his shoulder as Rey straightened her shirt, “and, hey - you have to share this kid with me, you know.”

“No one I’d rather share her with,” she said, patting his tush as she planted a kiss to his shoulder and headed to make dinner.

Christmas brought far, far too many gifts, as Dawn’s grandparents, aunts and uncles overwhelmed their three-bedroom home with every variation of loud, garish, and ridiculous toy known to man. Dawn sat on her mother’s hip when the delivery man dropped off another package, maybe from her uncles in Texas, her family in Tennessee, her grandparents in Colorado or BelAir, and Rey wondered where to put them all.

“We are going to have a marvelous time, daddy. Don’t you worry,” Leia said as she snuggled Dawn into her arms during awards season. “Go and win a statue or something.” She shooed Ben away as he stood towering over his short mother and his tiny daughter as they made their goodbyes until the limo arrived. “Have fun! Don’t hurry back!” Leia shouted, waving from the front picture window with Dawn in her arms as Ben helped Rey into the back of the car.

“You look stunning,” he said when the car door closed and the driver began the ride into Hollywood. “Smell delicious, too.” He mouthed at her skin as she giggled, crushing his tickling whiskers into the crook of her neck.

“Look who’s talking, handsome,” she said, eyeing his perfect tuxedo. He lifted his chin and winked at her as he helped her from the car as the crowd lining the red carpet roared. It wasn’t her first award show, but she hadn’t quite gotten used to it yet, either.

When Jennifer Allison stepped onto the red carpet, long legs in slim tuxedo pants made to order, a deep-v neck blouse under a masculine blazer she somehow wore better than anyone could have, Rey’s breath hitched as she squeezed her husband’s hand. Ben barely smiled as Jen greeted them while the flashbulbs popped, and Rey pressed her lined lips together and steadied herself on strappy heels.

“The girl I’ve heard so much about,” Jen smiled widely as photographers screamed her name. Her glossy lips parted as she laughed as if Ben said something funny, and she wrapped an arm around Rey as she turned to grin for the cameras.

“You’re just what the trashy tabloids say, aren’t you?” she said quietly as she smiled for the flashing cameras. The photos would say Ms. Allison was generous and forgiving, taking photos with her ex-boyfriend’s wife, but Rey felt her manicured nails dig into the flesh of her arm as she gave a breathy giggle.

“So glad I finally got to meet you,” Jen enthused falsely as she met Rey’s eyes before sliding further down the red carpet. Her eyes were sweetness and spears and her voice laced with poisoned syrup as she took Rey’s hands in her own.

“Me, too,” Rey said as she cocked her head and spoke kindly. “I just love your pajamas.”

She didn’t miss the hard set of Jen’s jaw as her eyes narrowed microscopically, and Ben tugged Rey with him to the next interviewer as she internally crowed in victory. You don’t get a pseudo-big sister like Paige Tico all your life and not learn a thing or two about throwing shade.

If Ben had won an award that night, it couldn’t have topped the feeling she had as people shouted “Mrs. Solo! Mrs. Solo! There’s Ben and Rey!” while they cruised through the evening. It was a foreign land, but Rey was learning the language and befriending the natives.
No one asked about Gemma Snoke, since she’d been shunned from the industry bigwigs, apparently recently relocated to Dubai, hoping to find sponsors for a new studio. Hux was too busy promoting his other clients to do more than wink at Rey from across the audience, while nearly ignoring Ben altogether.

Rose and Gun’s arrival made it that much easier to feel comfortable in California, and she knew it the minute they arrived. Gliding down the escalator to LAX arrivals, their beloved friends arguing as the horde of them stood fighting over who would be allowed to hold Dawn first.

“You’re moving here permanently,” Finn said as he looked down at Rose as the escalator descended. “So, I have first dibs.”

“No way, she’s named after me,” Paige said as she stepped in front of Poe to reach Rey first. “Come here, Dawn Paige Solo. Come to Aunt P.” She scooped Dawn out of Rey’s arms before the others were off the escalator and pulled oversized sunglasses down over her eyes. “Where’s my driver?”

“Right here, smart mouth,” Mal said as he appeared behind her, leaning to kiss her as he teased her with his favorite endearment. “You guys all set?”

Gun and Rose greeted Ben and Rey as Finn and Poe waited a turn, and pretty soon they were all headed into town, first to Gun and Rose’s new house, and then to headquarters. With renters lined up for Gun’s land in Tennessee, and considering his joint venture with Ben, not to mention how much time Rey and Rose still spent chatting over Facetime, it made sense to make the move out west. Once they’d found the perfect house it was a done deal. It was just as Rey had told Rose, charming and sweet, a Craftsmen like the house in Tennessee, with a park across the street for their baby once she arrived in a few months.

“I can’t believe I didn’t understand your mood swings when you were pregnant,” Rose wailed as she held Rey’s hand to her chest, walking through the halls of the updated bungalow she and Gun bought. “I was such a bad friend, Reyrey,” she cried.

Rey snorted and hugged her close, patting her tummy as Rose wiped her tearful eyes. “Let’s go feed the mommy,” she said to Rose’s belly as she led the group out to the cars.

Paige’s birthday was a raucous affair as always, splashing in the pool that lasted until the middle of the night as Dawn slept at Leia’s. Ben handed his baby’s godmother a little, blue box with a white bow as a birthday surprise.

“Wha-?” she exclaimed, holding the small box reverently where she sat propped on Mal’s lap while Ben sat down beside Rey. “Benny! No! It’s too much!”

The unmistakable Tiffany box sat perfect in her palm and she glanced around at the group on Rey and Ben’s back patio as the dark, summer night waves broke in the distance.

“Open it,” he nodded as he smiled brightly, an arm tight around Rey’s shoulders. “I missed your birthday once, and Paige Tico deserved better.”

She had to remove her tiara that exclaimed “32!” when Malaak clasped the thin, silver chain around her neck, where a perfect “P” hung against her throat. Rey would have had sparkling tears shimmering in her eyes at such a gift, but Paige threw her head back and laughed and rushed to high five Ben instead.

“Ah, it’s good to be best friends with a movie star,” she sighed as she lounged with an arm around
Mal’s broad shoulders as they all laughed. “Be jealous, people. Be jealous.”

But now, with Rose too pregnant to move the last couple days, due to deliver their daughter any minute, Rey walked the beach hand-in-hand with her daughter as the Pacific lapped at their toes. She stopped every few steps as Dawn faltered on her one-year-old legs, squealing as the chilly water splashed up her shins.

They picked up shells and left footprints on the wet sand, a matching set of imprints showing how far they’d come where Rey turned back to look. When a huge wave knocked Dawn onto her bottom, wailing as her mother bent low to scoop her into her arms, Rey chuckled at how dramatic her cries were. Occupational hazard of being part of a generational Hollywood dynasty, Rey supposed, but hilarious nonetheless.

“Oh my goodness,” she crooned as the baby’s scrunched face relaxed into a smile as she met her mother’s eyes. They matched now, Rey’s eyes and Dawn’s, and their smiles mirrored one another’s as Rey placed her baby’s feet on the ground again, taking her tiny hand. “You didn’t need rescue after all, did you? Just a little refuge.”

The galloping of firm legs behind them made Rey turn to see Ben’s approach, bare chest glistening in the late summer sunshine as he led the daily run beside Gun. Nine of the most recent additions to *Solo No More*, the non-profit they’d created to find career options for veterans kept pace behind them, a crew of hunky men putting in their four miles as they ran down the beach together in one beautiful, alpha pack.

“I love my girls,” Ben said as he paused only long enough to kiss Rey’s lips as they jogged by, leaving Dawn with ruffled hair as she watched the group of men run down the beach.

“Da-da?” Dawn asked Rey as they sat down, matching toes burying into the soft sand as the sun shone on their shoulders.

“He’ll be back, baby,” Rey murmured as Dawn crawled through the sand and giggled, cooing as she made herself at home on their blanket. “And I’m right here. Don’t worry. We’re a family.”

********

Chapter End Notes

Two things:
1) Paige Tico deserved better, and
2) I love you all, so much it’s a little embarrassing.

For all who have commented, kudos’d, bookmarked or subscribed, messaged, tweeted, recommended, enjoyed or walked beside me as I have written this work, know that you have my heart and all my thanks.
This is the story I wanted to tell, and I am endlessly grateful for the opportunity.
With all my heart,
Berry
Comments and Kudos clear skin and ease cramps. It's science.

xo

come be my person on tumblr or twitter

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!