Ben Solo had known he would marry Kaydel Connix since they were children. It was predestined, and who was he to argue with destiny? So when she runs off with someone else, Ben follows, determined to win her back.

Rey Johnson, on the other hand, has no such romantic notions. She does believe in revenge though. So when her cheating boyfriend Poe Dameron dumps her, she is determined to Make. Him. Pay.

When these jilted exes cross paths, they find they just might have a common goal they can work together on. But vengeance is a messy business, and these two don't realize just how much their own lives are about to change.
An "Addicted to Love" AU.
"I will follow her

Follow her wherever she may go

And near her I always will be

For nothing can keep me away

She is my destiny"

~*~*~

Not many of Ben Solo’s decisions had ever been his own. But he wasn’t bitter. No, he knew that destiny had guided his every step; his path was written in the stars. And who was he to argue with fate?

Ben’s family had a prestigious history. His great-grandfather, Anakin Skywalker had founded the elite Chandrila University nearly one hundred years ago, and unlike many higher education institutes of the time, it was co-ed from the start, thanks to his great-grandmother Padme’s influence. Their daughter, Breha, had been famed for vastly expanding the once small school with the addition of new programs. Today, his mother, Leia, was the University President and his Uncle Luke, the Dean of Students.

Naturally, Ben was expected to follow suit and, after finishing grad school, he began teaching mathematics at Chandrila. He expected to be Department Head within ten years. After all, carrying on his family’s legacy was his destiny.
And because Ben knew his path in life was predestined, he also knew that he was meant to marry Kaydel Connix - his childhood friend-turned-sweetheart. Her parents had been Chandrila University alumni, she worked in the school's admissions department, and his mother had regarded Kaydel as the daughter she'd never had since they were young. It was only fitting that one day she would join the family officially, as Ben's wife.

Everything was going according to plan.

Until Kaydel took a new job in Coruscant, of all places. Ben hadn't even realized she'd been looking for a career change! Who left a good, stable career path at Chandrila University in order to work as an assistant at some random radio station? Ben's appeals to logic couldn't pierce Kaydel's enthusiasm, however, and she had said goodbye with smiles and kisses, promising they would keep up a long distance relationship. Ben hadn't been exactly happy but had wished her good luck, certain this was some short-lived flight of fancy, and that Kaydel would be back soon. After all, destiny would win out in the end, right?

But after the first month, Kaydel's phone calls became less frequent. At six weeks, she went silent, and at six weeks and four days Ben received a "Dear John" letter via text.

Panic officially set in. This was not the plan. If Ben and Kaydel weren't together, what might fall apart next? Worse, if Ben had read this wrong, could he truly trust the other signposts and markers in his life?

No. No. Fate didn't get things wrong. Clearly, they were meant to be. This little upset was someone trying to cheat destiny. He could still make things right. And Ben, who had always trusted things to fate, sprang into action.

After reading that damned text for the one hundred and third time, Ben emailed the math department head and CC'ed his mother, informing them he wouldn't be teaching for the whole summer semester. He'd felt a fleeting twinge of guilt, but he'd only been lined up for two courses - they'd get it covered easily enough. He put his T.A. in charge of administering the reviews and final tests for his current classes and packed his bags.

Not many of Ben Solo's decisions had ever been his own. But never let it be said that he would fail to follow through.

One Greyhound bus and two Uber rides later and Ben was sitting outside of a coffee shop in Coruscant making use the wifi signal and trying to locate Kaydel. He was armed only with the name and call number of the radio station Kaydel was working at. He'd listened to it since he'd gotten close enough to pick up the signal - it played pretty bland Top 40 stuff and Kaydel wasn't even an on-air personality, but it made her feel a little less out of his reach. It didn’t help him actually find her though. He found the station offices easily enough on Google Maps, but knew that she worked mornings – and it was well after 6 p.m. Catching up with her there could be attempted another day.

In the meantime though…thank God for social media.

Naturally, Kaydel had unfriended him on Facebook (about twelve hours after the text, she had messaged him for the final time: "I'll always consider you a friend, Ben, but this will make things easier." Now when he opened that conversation thread, the app starkly reminded Ben "You and
Kaydel Ko Connix are not connected on Facebook.

However, Kaydel had never been meticulous about keeping her profile private. Most of her picture uploads were set to friends only, to Ben’s disappointment. But her reviews and check-ins (and she was excessive about reviews and check-ins) were public.

Ben scrolled through Kaydel’s profile, tracing her days and frequent outings, taking notes in a little Moleskine notebook he’d overpaid for at the bus station, listing favorite and frequent haunts of hers.

**Dex’s Diner** 3/5 Stars "Amaaaazing breakfast burritos, but the other entrees are lacking"

**Concourse Bazaar** 4/5 Stars "Really unique fashions - bit overpriced though."

**Takodana** 1/5 Stars "No infused vodkas. And the owner is kinda weird."

**Skysitter** 3/5 Stars "A bit gimmicky, but it's a lot of fun and desserts are to die for."

Some check-ins were one and done, other places she checked in to on a regular basis.

She was picky though, as Ben well knew. Almost no establishment earned five stars. Except for a pub called The Resistance. If Ben had logged on more frequently, he might have been tipped off by just how often Kaydel had been checking in there over the past month, and that her gushing comments frequently mentioned the "cute" bartender and owner.

Ben clicked through to The Resistance’s Facebook page. Most of the feed featured over-filtered pictures that had been auto-posted from the pub’s Instagram and posts about the daily specials. It was the kind of place that strove to evoke the atmosphere of an old-school bar, but tried too hard, with artificially distressed wood and bar stools that were too intentionally mismatched. The kind of place where rich kids ordered PBR just for the aesthetic.

He clicked ‘Community’ to see the posts customers had made to the page. Blurry pictures that partiers had drunkenly posted. Raves about the bar's signature drink – Juri Juice. The regulars, though, had helpfully tagged their favorite staff: "Jessica Pava makes the best Ice Blaster!" "Snaps wasn’t on his game tonight... Sith Scorchers are supposed to be dry, not the burgers!" Skimming a few posts, Ben discovered that a certain Poe Dameron was the owner.

Ben clicked over to Poe’s personal page. The guy smiled with entirely too much teeth (who could really be that happy?) but Ben had to grudgingly admit that Poe was good looking - all sparkling eyes and hair with a bit of curl to it. The profile had a curated feel to it. There was a smattering of personal photos and posts, clearly chosen to show off a certain, polished side to his life, and links to his bar's page and an airfield. No memes shared, no vague posts. If he'd been tagged in any unflattering pictures or comment-thread-fights, he must have been quick to remove the tags. Apparently, the guy not only owned a pub but also had a plane (an X-Wing stunt plane) and occasionally worked as a flight instructor. Ben felt a little nauseous. He'd always been proud of his career path, but math professor suddenly looked very dull.

Ben only scrolled a little before coming across the post he both expected and dreaded.

"Poe Dameron is now in a relationship with Kaydel Ko Connix!"

It was paired with a picture of the two of them - Poe all charm and teeth, Kaydel smiling with her blonde hair let down around her face in waves. But she usually wears her hair up, Ben thought absently, absurdly.
Ben debated between throwing the phone out the window or saving a copy of the pic to torture himself. In the end, though, he began to dig for Poe's address. His home address wasn’t listed on whitepages.com, but of course, the bar's location was on Facebook.

_Maybe I could follow him home one night._

And "one night" might as well be _this_ night, so Ben found the bus stop and headed downtown.

The Resistance - a small bar, but clearly popular - was tucked between another club and an ice cream shop and, as night fell, the streets began to fill with bar hoppers. Ben bought a pack of cigarettes that he’d never smoke and let one after the other burn down as he sat at a table outside the ice cream place - closed for the night - hiding amongst smokers having a quick cigarette before heading to their next destinations.

Ben instantly recognized the curly haired man when he emerged from the bar. It was only 10 p.m.; other employees would take the closing shift, evidently. Poe was a bit smaller than expected but just as attractive as his Facebook photos. Ben jumped up from his perch, hoping to see Poe head for the bus or train, rather than leave him behind to watch a cab speed off into the night. But even better, the guy just kept walking and, being sure to keep a fair distance back, Ben was able to follow Poe all the way on foot. It was a short walk, less than a mile.

Focusing on the man more intently than the world around him, Ben stepped off a curb without looking, right into the path of a scuffed, old Harley Speeder. At the last moment, the motorcycle whipped around Ben and his heart raced at the near-death experience. The bike slowed to a stop about thirty feet down the road and the rider - clad head to toe in dusty brown riding gear - turned to look over their shoulder at Ben. Though he couldn’t see their eyes, due to the full coverage helmet, Ben was sure the rider was glaring at him, giving him a look that could wither a cactus.

Sheepishly, Ben waved in apology, and then looked both ways before attempting again to cross the road. The biker seemed to watch him another moment, and then shook their head and sped away.

His focus returning to Poe, Ben was just in time to watch the man disappear into the lobby of a building. It was all steel and cement and walls of glass, and was unlabeled, aside from the address etched into glass on the front door. But a glance into the lobby revealed a bank of mailboxes, a security desk, and a sign with an arrow pointing to "Pool/Steam Room." Ben pulled out his phone and a quick Google search of the address confirmed that it was a ritzy apartment complex. _D'qar Street Lofts_. Seven stories, and only two to four units on each floor.

Ben took a few minutes to canvas the neighborhood. Just a bit south of the bustling downtown hub where The Resistance had been, it was a blend of pricey lofts, chic boutiques, and top dollar restaurants sandwiched between functioning warehouses, weekly rate hotels, and actual dive bars (not hipster imitations) that had been there since long before trendsetters and property developers had fallen for Industrial Chic.

_Because of course. Where else would a prettyboy pilot-slash-pub owner live?_

Fate smiled on Ben though. One of those weekly rate hotels was situated directly across from Poe's building. Ben walked to the corner store, bought a soda, and returned at a slower pace, trying to catch a glimpse of Poe or Kaydel in one of the windows of the loft building. He'd really rather not
think that Kaydel had moved in with this guy already, but Ben had called the hotel she had been staying at on his way into town and she was no longer there. It wasn’t much of a reach.

A few hundred feet away upscale complex, Ben’s stomach flipped. On display in front of a floor-to-ceiling window, he watched Poe nonchalantly approach a couch, drawing Ben’s attention to the blonde figure there. Poe kissed the woman’s head, innocently, as though he weren’t up there derailing Ben’s entire life.

Ben swore and clenched his fist around the soda bottle in his hand. Luckily it was plastic, and so while the outburst created a sticky mess, his palm wasn't embedded with glass. He forced himself to take a couple deep breaths and tossed aside the now empty soda bottle. He counted up from the ground floor to Poe's loft and then crossed the street to The Crait Suite Inn, hoping that the night clerk would be able to get him a room on the fourth floor.

For once, Ben was ready to take charge of his own life. Little did he know that someone else had recently arrived at a very similar conclusion.

Chapter End Notes

I've read (and loved!) a few "You've Got Mail" AUs. It also put me in the mood to write a Reylo AU inspired by my personal favorite Meg Ryan Rom-Com, "Addicted To Love." As a nod to the movie, the title is also borrowed from a song. But I decided to go with this Blondie fave rather than Robert Palmer. Chapter titles and intro lyrics are from obsessive songs too.

And I know Ben is chasing after someone else here, but please, please trust me! I’m all about Reylo, and Ben is too…he just hasn’t realized yet. :) And I won’t make you wait too long. Ben will cross paths with that mysterious biker again very soon. :) While the actual relationship is slow burn, Rey and Ben will start getting under each other's skin and upending each other's lives sooner than they expect!

Please note the tags for some subject matter that doesn't take place during the fic but is mentioned/discussed - past issues of abandonment and attempted assault. I have more detailed notes on the relevant chapters for these discussions too.

One last note...It's in the tags but I just want to be clear that there will be stalking and obsessive behavior in this fic. It's not meant to be glorified but it's also not condemned as seriously as it would be in real life (If you have seen the movie, you'll know what I mean). In short, Ben and Rey do shady, illegal stalker stuff but we're rooting for them anyway. I just want to make sure people are aware up front, so they can walk away now if they need to.

Thanks for reading! This is my first Reylo fic and I'd love to know your thoughts!

Edited. I'm now working with a beta! The wonderful @colliderofhadron is
helping me fix up old chapters as well as beta'ing the new updates :) She's the best!
The days began to drift by, and Ben settled into his new routine. He had managed to secure a fourth-floor room at the Crait Suite Inn with a perfect view into the loft across the way and was quick to learn Poe and Kaydel’s daily schedules. He didn’t approach either of them, but instead merely observed, arming himself with information and waiting for the opportune moment.

Breakfast with the happy couple (well, watching the happy couple). Taking notes. Sitting outside the KZSO station to catch glimpses of Kaydel running errands for the staff. Recording observations. Following Poe to The Resistance or, less frequently, to the airfield. More notes. Trailing one or both of them to markets and bookstores and cafes and nights out with friends. Pages and pages of notes and charts and attempts at mapping out patterns.

Ben’s math degree, it seemed, was an asset to this mission. This real-world research project might even make him a better statistics teacher when he returned to Chandrila. When this mess is all in the past, he thought wryly. However, by mid-June, with three weeks of data compiled, Ben still hadn’t found anything significant.

Well. Not in relation Poe or Kaydel anyway.

There was one unexplained outlier.

A piece of data that didn’t seem to fit, didn’t seem to have anything to do with what Ben was tracking. And yet. There it was. It appeared far too often to ignore and had inexplicably earned its own section in Ben’s log books. There was no reason for it to matter but Ben couldn’t dismiss it as mere coincidence.

The biker that had nearly mowed Ben down his first night in the city seemed to surface nearly everywhere Ben went. Even in a city this size, he could explain away seeing some of the same people over and over again. There was an older man – former military, if Ben were to guess by the way he carried himself – was often at the Starbucks near KZSO and always seemed to shout his coffee order, not unkindly, but as if he had no sense of volume control. A businesswoman, always clad in sleek and conventional pantsuits that contrasted with her startling purple hair, frequented the organic food store where Kaydel liked to shop. A fit-looking goth guy that inexplicably applied his full eyeliner before his daily jog in the park that Ben passed on his way towards Poe’s bar. The difference was that all of these factors were relatively contained. They repeated in the same places, and at fairly regular intervals.
The biker on the other hand… The biker was an unknown. Ben gathered that she was a woman by now – the cut of her clothing didn’t hide her figure the way that the darkness and distance had that first night, and he caught the occasional glimpse of a distinctively feminine face framed by chestnut locks on the rare times she removed her helmet – but that was about the extent of his knowledge.

On paper, she should be considered average. She was not particularly tall, nor especially short. Her curves were feminine but not overly voluptuous. Her wavy hair was brown – the most common hair color for a white woman. Her clothes were nondescript – simple cuts and varying neutral shades. She really shouldn’t occupy as much as much of Ben’s attention as she did.

Her continued presence baffled Ben. He rarely saw her actually go into any shops or restaurants. He couldn’t tie her to any particular establishment, couldn’t pinpoint if she had a job anywhere nearby, and never saw her interact with anyone else. She just always appeared. Ben would be surreptitiously watching Kaydel or Poe in the reflection of a glass door, and suddenly the young woman would move into his peripheral vision. Or he’d be jotting down notes and the sound of her Speeder would cause him to look up. He’d seen her zip around and around the block – moving but not actually going anywhere – or simply perched on her parked motorcycle, staying still for stretches of time. But he couldn’t understand why she was always around.

Ben wished the girl would remove her helmet more often. It was maddening, to not be able to read her face. Ben could ascribe a motivation or purpose for almost any other person he encountered on his daily treks – socializing, working, whatever – but not her. And so she earned a section in one of his notebooks. Ben wasn’t sure exactly how it was relevant to his mission, but he was charting patterns and she had become a pattern in his days.

“Good morning, Dear.” Ben smiled warmly at Kaydel over his cereal bowl.

Well. He smiled at the projection of Kaydel on his wall over his cereal. For the first few days in Coruscant, he had literally sat by his window, staring across into Poe and Kaydel’s loft. He had used binoculars to get a better view. However, he had to admit that if anyone walking by looked up and saw him, it would look pretty shady.

Also, it was difficult to write and hold binoculars at the same time.

The camera obscura projector had been fairly easy to build, and the tiny lens he’d stitched into his blackout curtains was all but invisible – much less suspicious. It was a step up from the DIY projector ideas floating around on Pinterest – his was built with magnifying lenses to zero in on the apartment across the street, and he had constructed a relay box with a series of mirrors so that the final image projected on his wall was right-side up. The device could even be pivoted enabling him to observe different areas of the apartment – anywhere exposed by those vast windows.

Ben watched as Poe drummed his fork on the edge of his plate between bites. Kaydel rolled her eyes and put her hand on his, stilling his actions. It wouldn’t last, Ben knew. Poe always resumed his fidgeting; he could never sit still.

Ben couldn’t hear anything, of course, but his imagination supplied a soundtrack. Kaydel was probably trying to tell Poe something interesting or important - what exactly, he wasn’t sure, but Poe wasn’t being respectful, that he was sure of.
“Yes, obnoxious isn’t it?” Ben smirked as if sharing a joke with Kaydel. He’d never be so disrespectful. He would have been hanging on Kaydel’s every word.

He set his chipped bowl aside and reached for a notebook labeled “Both Subjects – Home.” The one measly logbook he’d started with had soon become too small for the scope of this project and he had purchased extras – one for Poe’s excursions, one for Kaydel’s, one for social media tracking, and so forth.

Flipping to the page with the header “Indications of Annoyance” Ben made a mark on the ‘a.m.’ column with the date and a note describing the occurrence. He was pleased to see an increase in this category. Surely, it would only be so long until Kaydel was completely fed up.

Kaydel turned her face for a brief moment to look out the window but it felt like she was gazing towards him. Ben wished he could read lips.

Poe laughed and leaned across the kitchen table, cutting off the rest of Kaydel’s commentary with a kiss. She kissed him back then smiled against his mouth and spoke again.

*Maybe not.*

“You want a laugh? I heard a great joke the other day.” Okay, Ben hadn’t *heard* it. Hux, his acquaintance-slash-almost-friend from the math department, and the one person from home he’d remained in contact with when he fled, had texted him. Still, it was a good one. “What do you get when you cross a mosquito with a mountain climber?”

Ben waited a beat, ignored the fact that Kaydel was still nuzzling Poe, pretended she had responded to his query with a guess or a ‘*what?’*”

“Nothing. You can’t cross a vector with a scaler,” Ben snickered to himself in the dim emptiness of his room.

Ben watched as breakfast plates were dumped into the farmhouse style sink and Poe and Kaydel left the kitchen. Kaydel towards the door – it was 7:30, she was heading to work with enough time to pick up the coffee order on the way in – and Poe towards the bedroom to change – The Resistance didn’t open until 11 a.m., so he’d be taking his corgi, Bebe, to the dog run before making his way downtown.

Ben had a few minutes to himself before he ventured out and about. He had tailed Kaydel the day before, so today was Poe’s turn. Where his days with Kaydel took on a (slightly desperate, if he were honest with himself) desire to just be near her, Ben’s anger was close to the surface with Poe – he kept hoping to catch that annoyingly cheerful rogue doing something…well…rouge-ish, something scandalous that would send Kaydel rushing back to his own arms sooner rather than later.

Instead, and much worse, he watched as Poe went about his day with a friendly ease. He smiled at everyone he passed, was polite to cashiers and baristas and any service personnel he encountered, and carried himself with a confidence Ben envied. It made it easy to see what Kaydel saw in the man.

Ben had been hit on enough times to know, on some level, that he was attractive. He was tall and fit and, though he hated his big ears and awkward nose, his dark hair, and eyes helped to balance out his facial features. He never really *felt* it though and, Kaydel aside, no woman had remained interested him after that initial flare of attraction. He’d never been great in social situations, but where his demeanor might be seen as shy on another man, with his height and build, he knew he came off as a grouchy, brooding giant.
Ben had now developed a fairly good idea of where his subjects were headed and he had begun to delay his own exit by a handful of minutes, to minimize any chance of being spotted. But in the small window of time after Poe had departed, dog in tow, and before Ben left his own abode, a startling anomaly occurred.

Ben had been at his door, notebook in hand (Subject: P – Away), ready to leave when a sudden movement caught his attention. Ben turned back towards the wall, towards his constant projection of the Dameron loft. Poe had left, right? He’d seen him walk out. The room was still. It must have been a bird flying in front of the lens, that’s all.

But before Ben could turn again to make his own exit, a figure emerged from behind one of the pillars near the door. He hadn’t imagined it. Someone was in Poe and Kaydel’s apartment. It wasn’t either of them, however. Nor was it the maid service that came on Thursdays.

It was the Unknown. No helmet, since she was indoors – her hair was up in a strange three-bun style he’d seen her sport a few times. She moved through the open concept apartment with purpose, as if she was supposed to be there. She stopped at the kitchen table and straightened the potted cactus that sat there, turning, then centering it.

Ben didn’t know exactly how to comprehend this development – it was odd enough to see her everywhere he went, but downright inconceivable to spot her there – but he handled it as he handled all new information: by writing it down. He pulled his Misc. notebook from his pocket and found the section with his sightings of her. It practically warranted its own logbook, but he wouldn’t know what to title it. That Biker Girl? The Outlier? The Woman in Brown?

Sitting back down on his loveseat, Ben watched the projection and started a new page for today’s sighting. Date, time, place…all easy enough to record. Though he wasn’t sure exactly how to catalog the event. “She walked around the loft” seemed too simplistic a description for an instance of breaking and entering. Of course – again – he couldn’t assign any sort of reason or motivation for the young woman’s behavior. She walked out of sight – into the bedroom and back out – and then walked towards the center window.

She looked right at Ben.

Well, of course, she couldn’t see Ben. Rationally, he knew this. But her eyes had flitted from side to side and then settled in his direction. He gave a panicked glance towards his own window – yes the curtains were still tightly drawn – and back at the projection. From here, he was afforded a closer look at the details that eluded him when he had caught fleeting glances out on the streets. That her eyes were not brown, but hazel. The smattering of freckles – faded but still present across her cheeks and nose. The very slight dimples that appeared when she smirked.

That last detail became apparent because as she stood at that window, staring right towards Ben’s, she did smirk.

Against all logic, Ben was convinced she was staring – smirking – at him. He shrank back into the cushions as if to hide from the gaze that he knew, he knew, couldn’t be trained on him. And yet…

Ben knew that he should not draw attention to himself. The smart thing to do would be to wait this out. Let the girl get bored and leave. If she did suspect someone was watching the loft, he didn’t want to give her any proof.

Ben knew what he should do. Instead, he crept over to his window and pulled the blackout curtain back just a couple inches. This time there was no doubt, the woman’s eyes locked directly on his. He froze a moment – watching her watching him watching her.
He dropped the curtain and looked, again, towards the projection. The slight smirk the girl had worn before had blossomed into a wide, honestly terrifying, smile. She said something and for the second time that day, Ben wished he could read lips, though this unanswered plea was driven by panic. She actually waved in his direction before sauntering back out of the loft.

Ben spent the next hour pacing. He barely noticed when Poe brought Bebe home and changed again to leave. Every time someone walked down the hallway, every time he heard a siren in the distance, Ben was sure the girl had called the police, and that they were coming for him. He debated tearing apart his room and fleeing.

But then he told himself he had also seen that woman break into an apartment that wasn’t hers – who was she to call the authorities? Besides, he’d gotten his camera obscura perfectly positioned – he didn’t want to have to recalibrate anything.

Then he would hear loud and heavy footfalls again and the panic would resurface (looking through the peephole revealed it to be a couple of kids that lived down the hall).

The morning faded into the afternoon in a haze of nerves and worry, but by the time four o’clock rolled around, no one had broken down Ben’s door and slapped cuffs on him, so his fear faded and morphed into irritation that The Outlier had robbed him of several hours of research and observation.

Sure, he could consult his notes and know where to find Poe. He knew that the man took a break in the lull between his pub’s lunch rush and the night crowds. And he knew how Poe generally filled those in-between hours: doing the grocery shopping, coming home to fawn over Bebe, grabbing coffee with some of his employees from The Resistance, heading to his gym, or surprising Kaydel at her station. Checking his charts, Ben could fairly easily deduce what action Poe took today (it was Tuesday and Poe had skipped his weekend workout – he’d most likely find him at the gym).

But his entire day had been thrown off. Ben’s routine had been disrupted and he didn’t feel like making the trek, on the offhand chance that he was wrong. So he chalked up the day to lost and headed out to a café down the street. It was a small, bohemian place and the patio seating out front was cluttered with potted olive and bay trees. It was intended to give the place an atmosphere of natural beauty and life in contrast to the steel and cement all around.

Ben liked it because the greenery created a nice, hidden post from which to watch the entrance to the D’Qar Street Loft building. He’d admittedly become fond of the café’s cucumber pomegranate lemonade as well.

Today’s events warranted something more than what was essentially juice that been dolled up, however, so he ordered one each of their “Pretentious Beer of Week” and “Crappy Beer of the Week.” He downed the cheap can of Fozbeer to jumpstart his buzz then slowly nursed the pint of Thuris Stout, savoring the flavor while watching for Kaydel’s return.

He ordered an additional stout – there apparently was a good reason for it costing as much as it did – when an hour passed by with no Kaydel. She might have been meeting her friend Jess after work – those types of outings weren’t regular enough to accurately predict. But because nothing had gone according to Ben’s expectations that day, The Girl on the Bike did show up.

“Hey there,” she said, plopping down in the chair next to Ben as if she’d been expected. The British
lilt startled him, although he’d had no good reason to expect anything particular from her voice. “Nice weather we’re having, right?”

“Um.” Ben stared at her, confused. Whatever line of questioning he’d expected – accusations of spying, threats of blackmail, maybe – small talk about the weather wasn’t it. Also, the sky was pretty overcast; it both looked and smelled like it would rain soon. Unsure of what else to say, he pointed out this obvious fact.

“Exactly.” The brunette reached across the table and plucked the sunglasses from Ben’s face. “You’re making yourself really obvious.”

*Oh.* Out loud, he merely scoffed. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Come on now, let’s not play games. I know what you’re up to.”

Ben remained silent and hoped his face didn’t betray him. He had just enough alcohol in him to not fully panic, but this girl had pieced together enough to make him nervous. He didn’t incriminate himself further.

The girl rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to let your secret out. I just think we –” she used Ben’s sunglasses to gesture between the two of them, “– could help each other out.”

Ben just took another swig of his beer and eyed her suspiciously. If she found his behavior off-putting, she didn’t show it.

“What’s your name, anyway? I’m tired of calling you Emo Corey Hart.”

“What?” Ben nearly choked on his drink.

“That’s what I named you in my head. You know,” she shrugged, then began to sing, “I wear my sunglasses at night...so I can, so I can see the light that's right before my eyes.”

“Hm,” was Ben’s astute reply. Her voice wasn’t half bad. Nice, even. But he wasn’t going to say that and encourage her.

“So? Your name?”

“Uh, Kylo.” He blurted out the first fake name that popped into his head, “Kylo Ren.”

The girl laughed out loud and Ben cringed inwardly. Okay, so the *Celestial Battles* series was a bit out of the limelight these days, but choosing an alias from an old cult classic and trying to sell it as legitimate clearly wasn’t a good idea.

“What’s your name, *Kylo Ren*?” she asked again, a bit of laughter still in her voice.

“Ben.” Unable to think if a decent name on the spot, he opted for honesty this time.

“Hi Ben, I’m Rey.” She held out her hand to shake his as if this meeting and introduction were perfectly normal.

Ben shook it (because what else *could* he do?) and was surprised by the strength of her grip. Her hand was small. The girl – Rey – was smaller overall than he had expected after seeing her only from afar, but Ben knew that had more to do with his own size – most people seemed small next to him.

“So, are we in this together, then?” She was right back at it.
“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about my ex-fiancé filling up your little Goldilocks’s dance card every night, and what we’re going to do about it.” Rey pointed up towards the loft, where the lights were now on. Kaydel had arrived while Ben was distracted by this strange little conversation.

He smiled up at her as if she could see him. “I don’t need to do anything. Kaydel is coming back to me, you’ll see. We’re destined to be together.”

“Destiny, huh? How’s that working out? Destiny lead her right into Poe’s bed on the way to meet you at the altar? Funny route to take,” Rey scoffed, snagging Ben’s beer and chugging the rest of it.

The jab got to Ben a little more than he wanted to admit, so instead of responding, he just dropped a few twenties on the table to cover his bill and stood up.

“Excuse me. I have somewhere to be.”

Rey jumped to her feet as well. “Going to lurk outside The Resistance again?”

Yes.

“No.”

Rey didn’t buy his denial.

“Ugh. I’ve spent enough time there. We’ll talk again later.” Rey emphatically rubbed her bare arms and Ben noticed for the first time that she’d skipped her leather motorcycle jacket this evening of all evenings. “Hey, let me borrow your jacket – I’ve got a further walk than you.”

“As we’ve discussed, it’s chilly and likely to rain. I wore a jacket for a reason. Anyway, how do I know you aren’t going to steal it?”

“You’ll get it back. Unless you’re ready to give up your daily routine – and we both know you’re not – I’ll be seeing you around real soon.” Rey smirked and Ben knew she was right. “Come on, aren’t you a gentleman? Help a lady out.”

Ben rolled his eyes, but he caved and sighed as he shrugged out of his jacket. “I want it back in perfect condition.” It was an old _Jedi Only_ jacket that had belonged to his uncle – nothing of worth to most people, but it held sentimental value to him.

“Aye, Aye.” Rey gave him a mock salute after sliding her arms into the jacket. She was practically swimming in it.

Ben looked over his shoulder at Rey once as he walked away, still feeling a bit fuzzy and off-kilter from the beers, but also, he suspected from the strange exchange that had just taken place.

A few hours later, Ben trudged home, wet as a drowned rat. The night, like the day, had been a waste.

The churning sky had made good on its promise to rain shortly after Ben had made his way downtown. But it wasn’t a pleasant summer shower, it was a deluge. Ben grumbled to himself about
being stupid enough to loan out his jacket, but the truth was it wouldn’t have made much of a difference. The rain came down in sheets and there was no way Ben could stay outside to watch the pub, though he tried to wait it out at first.

Eventually, he’d darted into another bar and restaurant across the street and tried to keep an eye on The Resistance from there, but between the tinted windows and the rain further obscuring his vision, Ben couldn’t see a thing. Not that he ever saw much any other day, other than Poe stepping out for the occasional smoke. It was the least informative of Poe’s observable activities.

So finally, around 10 p.m., Ben left. He didn’t see Poe leave, but he didn’t really care if he beat him home tonight or not, either. His clothing had never fully dried from earlier, so he didn’t waste money on Uber for the short trip. He ran through the downpour and made it back in record time. He’d never been so glad to step into the musty lobby of the Crait Suite Inn and climb those creaky stairs to the fourth floor (in theory, there was an elevator, but it hadn’t been in service as long as Ben had been staying there).

It wasn’t until he was facing the door to room 405 and desperately digging into his jeans pockets that Ben remembered. He had tucked his room key into the inside zipper pocket on his jacket.

Shit.

It was supposed to be safer there. Ben snickered bleakly at the situation. He’d have to hope maintenance was available and had backups so that he wouldn’t be waiting for a 24-hour locksmith to show up. He cursed again, at the fact that this place was too rundown and outdated to have keycards. Ben groaned and began to walk back towards the stairwell.

Then the creak of a door and a mirthful voice with a British accent froze him in place.

“I’m surprised you stayed out this late!”

Ben turned around slowly. Surely he was hearing things.

Nope.

Unless he was hallucinating, that was his room. And the voice belonged to the biker girl (Rey, a voice in his head reminded him). And she was standing in the doorway, as though she belonged there, letting him into his own home.

Chapter End Notes

Hm. What plans and tricks does Rey have up her sleeves? :P I told you she'd be making herself known very soon.

By the way, I know Ben seems a little harsh in his description of Rey as exceedingly average, but you know, and I know, that he doth protest too much. Also, I like to think that, aside from her clothes being a shoutout to Rey's neutral shades in the movies, that Rey is also a bit better at this lurking and spying thing than Ben, she's making an effort to blend in.
This chapter is a little later than I planned. But the past week kept me busy. Hope you enjoy! Let me know what you think! :)

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**Edited 8/14/18:** I am now working with a beta on this story! Huge, huge thanks to @colliderofhadron on tumblr for helping with upcoming chapters as well as tidying up past chapters. I'll be coming back to update with revisions as we work our way through past/posted chapters but the heart of the story isn't changing, so rereading isn't a necessity. If any edits DO end up altering something significant, I will mention it in an author's note on the latest chapter so no one will be left in the dark. :)}
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"If I was invisible

Then I could just

Watch you in your room

(Wait...I already am)"

~*~*~

It had been an educated guess, but one that paid off, when Rey Johnson thought she heard a jingle when Ben had stood up. She’d smiled when she’d dug her hands into the coat pockets and found the keyring, as she watched Mr. Sunglasses In A Storm walk away. Rey had waited until he’d just rounded the corner before she had fetched her bag from where it was tethered on to her bike, and jogged down to Crait Suite Inn and up the stairs.

It had been a smart idea – snagging a place across the street from Poe’s, she gave the guy that. It hadn’t been in Rey’s budget, even a dinky place like this.

She’d known it was the fourth floor from counting windows; luckily 405 was helpfully etched on the key itself to save her from needing to guess the exact unit. When Rey opened the door, what she found was better than she could have expected.

Not the room itself. It was pretty typical for a place that straddled the border between run-down hotel and cheap, tackily furnished apartment. Rey had passed a few black-and-white pictures hung in the dim lobby that proved Crait Suite Inn had once been a nice hotel, back when the city was young and this neighborhood had experienced its first round of popularity.

Those days we long gone.

Aside from the bathroom, it was one, multifunctional room. A bare-bones kitchenette had been tucked into one corner at some point when the establishment had started catering to long-term residency. The furniture was of the usual no-frills motel variety – a bed with a gaudy bedspread, cheap end tables, and a low, scuffed dresser, and two-cushion sofa with scratchy upholstery.

But the centerpiece was what hadn’t come pre-furnished.

Ben had shoved and dragged the furniture around the cramped living space as best he could, seemingly, in order to leave one wall completely empty and exposed. And that wall was instead filled with a moving image of the loft across the way.

It was as if Rey was watching a silent movie.

She had determined that Emo Corey Hart had been keeping an eye on the love nest from here; she didn’t realize he had a video feed. A smile spread across her face. This only made her own little
surprise even better. She dug into her bag and began setting it up.

It took a long time for Ben to come back.

Honestly, Rey had expected the rain to drive him home earlier. She knew, from the times their stakeouts had overlapped, that he never went *into* The Resistance, just skulked around outside like a hitman who had been demoted because he was terrible at being subtle.

Goldilocks had been particularly dull this evening. She had watched the woman take Bebe out to relieve herself, reheat a leftover steak for dinner, and then fall asleep on the couch in front of the TV. Rey felt like nodding off herself.

To pass the time, she’d also thumbed through the stack of notebooks on the dresser.

*Stars, this guy was scrupulous.* He had charts of when Poe and Kaydel had smiled, including the duration, what caused it….even how many teeth the smile had shown. Rey snorted at sarcasm that edged through the formality of the notes when Ben had described Poe’s grins.

How many bags Kaydel exited the Whole Foods with. How often Poe ordered single vs double-shot lattes. Which side of the couch they sat on. Charting arguments (*not many, ugh*), she understood, but how was half of this nonsense even relevant?

Rey rolled her eyes and picked up another book.

*Oh.*

This one was…interesting.

Nearly a quarter of this book was about *her.* It was discomfiting, to see the record of her spying – her trailing after Poe like some needy dog – spelled out in black and white. Sure she’d snuck into her ex’s apartment just that morning, but none of it had seemed quite this real until she saw it, documented as if it were part of a school project.

Rey slammed the book closed and huffed when the softcover didn’t give her the satisfying thump she’d hoped for. *No.* She wasn’t going to be ashamed.

This was all Poe’s fault anyway. Why should she feel guilty? He deserved what he got.

And anyway, if she was guilty, so was this Ben. Speaking of which...he definitely needed her help. He’d noticed her hanging around the same couple for the better part of a month and hadn’t put two and two together as she had? Not to mention, waiting for *destiny* to come along and lure Goldilocks away from Poe was a stupid plan.

Finally, as she stacked the books the way she’d found them, Rey heard a hand on the doorknob and a low groan from the other side. She schooled her annoyance into a smile and headed for the door.

*Time to bargain.*

“I’m surprised you stayed out this late!” Rey called out to Ben’s retreating form.

He turned around and froze. To say that he looked shocked would be an understatement, but Rey
just beckoned him closer, as if this situation was perfectly normal.

*Please don’t go tell the desk clerk. Please don’t make a scene.*

Out loud, she said, “Are coming in or are you trying to water the floor? You know those hideous flowers are just part of the carpet.”

That worked.

“You can’t invite me into my own home,” Ben finally said, as he stalked past her into the room.

“I kinda just did.” Rey closed the door.

Ben’s eyes flicked over towards the projection and the tips of his ears flushed red. Rey hadn’t noticed how big they were until the rain had plastered his dark hair to his head. When he was nervous like this, instead of brooding around like an aspiring serial killer, he kinda reminded her of a puppy. An awkward, overgrown puppy. Rey briefly thought of Marmaduke and Clifford and suppressed a snort.

Ben was mumbled something incoherent about Pinterest and art installations and experiments. Clearly still trying to deny that he was actively stalking his ex-girlfriend even as proof of his illicit activity was being literally broadcast right there in front of both of them.

Rey chose not to call him out again. She had been sincere when she said they could help each other out – many hands make light work and all that – and she didn’t want to irritate him too much. Instead, she intentionally “misunderstood” his nervous glance and bumbling explanation.

“Don’t worry, you didn’t miss much. She let the dog out, ate dinner, yadda yadda. Pretty boring.” Rey plopped onto the loveseat, gesturing at the wall.

“Kaydel is *not* boring,” Ben growled, fists clenched.

He was probably going for intimidating but the display was somewhat undercut by the fact that he was still soaking wet and shivering. Rey felt a slight twinge of guilt at depriving him of his jacket but then shrugged it off. It had been necessary. Anyway, he could have come in out of the rain much earlier. *That* wasn’t her fault.

“Sorry.” Rey was aware that she didn’t sound sorry at all. “I’m sure she’s a peach and you two will very happy together. And I can help you get there. If you’ll help me too.”

“Listen, I don’t know what kind of scheme you’ve cooked up, but I don’t need it. I told you. Kaydel is coming back to me.” Ben kicked off his shoes and sloshed towards the bathroom, fetching a towel as he spoke. “If you want your boyfriend back, you can go after him yourself.”

Rey scoffed out loud. She ought to chuck something at the oaf. She wasn’t pathetically pining like he was, *thank you very much.*

“I don’t want him back,” Rey spit. She’d already spent enough time waiting around for Poe, and before him… *Well, never mind.* She was done waiting was the point.

“You don’t?” Ben reemerged from the bathroom, toweling at his hair and clothes. It was a lost cause. “Then why ask for my help? Why stick around at all if you don’t want him back?” He sounded truly perplexed that Rey wasn’t yearning for someone who had cheated on and then dumped her.

*Gee, why wouldn’t she want that?*
“I want to ruin him,” she stated honestly.

“What?!”

“I just want to strip him of his dignity, his happiness. I want to see him miserable, broken, and alone.”

“That’s a bit… I mean… how broken are we talking here?” Ben looked a little nervous, as he stuttered over his words.

Oh well, it was better to be upfront now. No sense in beating around the bush.

“I haven’t entirely decided,” Rey said with a shrug. “I’ll play it by ear. Oh! That reminds me.” She jumped up from the sofa with renewed purpose. In her distraction, she’d nearly forgotten why she’d come here tonight.

Rey hurried across the room to the low dresser under the window and gestured to the small black receiver she’d placed there, plugged into a small, portable speaker.

“This little theater has just graduated from silent films to Talkies,” she said, turning up the volume on the speaker with a flourish. The room suddenly filled with the sounds of Bebe’s playful yapping and the droning TV that Kaydel had left on.

“Is that...? Did you bug their apartment? Is that why you broke in this morning.” Ben’s face looked equal parts fascinated and appalled.

Rey rolled her eyes. 

As if he had any room for moral superiority.

“I didn’t break in. I still have a key.” Poe didn’t know she still had a key, but that wasn’t worth mentioning.

“This is a violation of Kaydel’s…of their privacy.” Ben had schooled his face into a stern look and tried to appear reasonable, but Rey could read his eyes – he was intrigued.

“Says the man who is videotaping them 24/7.” Rey nodded towards the wall serving as a screen again. She wasn’t trying to shame him for it, just point out that they were already on the same page.

“It’s not video,” Ben said, his voice indignant. “It’s a camera obscura. All light and mirrors. Nothing is being recorded.”

“Well, this is just a pretty basic audio transmitter. Unless I hook this up to a recording device, none of this is saved either. Just words lost on the wind.”

“My camera obscura is pointed at uncovered windows – I’m not capturing anything that anyone walking by couldn’t see.”

“Uncovered windows, yes. But four stories up. And even from your window, the naked eye can’t pick up this kind of detail. I know you have magnifying glasses or something in there. Think of this the same way. We might have heard mumbles and indistinct voices through an open window. We’re just using a bit of technology to enhance what we’re hearing.” Rey smiled, pleased with her comparison.

“We’re using technology? No, no, no. There is no ‘we’.” Ben crossed the room towards her and turned the speaker back off. “You are taking your little spy kit and leaving. I don’t need to participate in your revenge plot.”
Rey looked up at him defiantly. *Geez, this man was a giant.* Rey had never considered herself short, but she had to crane her neck to meet Ben’s eyes with him standing this close.

“There was no ‘we’. Now there is. This transmitter doesn’t have a very long range, so I needed to set it up somewhere close to the loft. And you…” Rey folded her arms smugly, “You need someone to *not* go to the police and turn you in for stalking.”

The color left Ben’s face and he gaped at her. “I’m not a stalker. I just…want to be with her.”

*Ugh.* Rey thought she might be sick. This guy had stepped out of some twisted reject of a Hallmark movie.

“Let’s see. You follow your ex and her new boyfriend around all day, take notes, and sit and watch them from a dark room across the street. That’s a pretty straightforward definition of stalking.” She felt slightly guilty about resorting to blackmail but… *a girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.*

“How is that so different from you? And you’ve got plans to do even worse.”

“Hmm. I see your point. But only one of us has left a paper trail.” Rey grinned widely and pointed to the stack of notebooks.

Ben opened his mouth to retort then snapped it shut. Rey knew she had him cornered. “Fine,” he grumbled between clenched teeth. “Leave it here.”

“Great!” Rey clapped her hands together and reached to turn the speaker on once more. “We can talk more in the morning and develop a plan of action. For now, you better go change before you get hypothermia and get some sleep. We can take turns, with who gets the bed and who has to sleep on the couch, so no one’s back gets too cramped up. I’ll take the couch tonight. That way I can stay up a bit and watch for Poe.”

Ben’s eyes widened. “I didn’t mean you could *stay* here.”

“How am I supposed to *listen* to my transmitter if I’m not *near* my transmitter? What, you thought I’d bring popcorn for movie night once a week? What if I miss something good?” Rey grabbed a pillow from the bed, carried it over to the loveseat and settled in. “I’m sticking around awhile. Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, clearly I did decide to bring in Rey POV. I don't know if we'll alternate every chapter but we will hear from both of them.

This ended up a bit shorter than planned. But I hope to have the next chapter up soon. I think we'll have a bit more fun now that Rey and Ben will spending more time together. Let's see what they get up to.

*Edited 8/22* Thank you to my new beta @colliderofhadron for helping me go back and edit these existing chapters!
In the past 24 hours, Ben’s life had, again, shifted dramatically.

When he’d woken up in the morning, he had kept his eyes closed for an extra moment. As if keeping himself in the dark – literally and figuratively – could somehow alter reality.

It could have been a dream. A fever dream. Maybe Ben had gotten sick, caught hypothermia out there in the rain. How long did that take to set in? He’d become delirious. Maybe he hadn’t even made it home. He’d passed out in that bar or on the street.

Of course, even before he finally opened his eyes, he could hear the yap of a little dog, the clank and clang of someone working in a kitchen, and the playful murmurs of two new lovers flirting over breakfast. Ugh. He didn’t want to hear their cooing.

That wasn’t the only difference he’d woken up to. Once he had forced himself to rise, Ben had discovered Rey standing at his closet, hands on hips, tsk-tsking all his clothing.

He had been itching to get back to his observations, but had been so disoriented and thrown by Rey’s presence that he couldn’t be sure whether it was Poe or Kaydel’s turn today. Rey hadn’t let him consult his notes and, instead, he’d been dragged to Thread and Ginger, a thrift shop housed in a tiny, converted theater. Rey had insisted that Ben’s largely monochrome wardrobe made him look like a Man in Black or someone from the mafia and, either way, he was liable to attract too much attention.

He had spent the entire morning choosing new shirts. Rey was picky. They needed some color (“You can’t prowl around like some sentient shadow creature”) but not too much color (“You don’t want to look like you’re going to a rave”).

“So, aside from my proximity to Dameron’s house, what exactly do you want from me?”

“I need you to get close to him, physically. Have you ever picked pockets before?” Rey held up a plaid flannel in shades of amber and brown. “Buy this one. It goes with your eyes.”

“Of course not. What is this, a Dicken’s novel?” The plaid shirt joined the growing pile in Ben’s shopping basket.

Rey rolled her eyes. “Pickpocketing is still very much a thing. Welcome to the city. What kinda farm town are you from anyway?”

“Chandrila. And it’s not a farm town. It’s really nice. I’m a professor at the university there. Math.”
"Oh, college town. Still nothing like Coruscant, I’m willing to bet."

She wasn’t wrong. Ben had never considered his hometown particularly small. It wasn’t a one-stoplight, everything’s-closed-on-Sunday kind of place. But it was a far cry from Coruscant. He had visited the city as a child and young adult, but staying here for an extended period of time was…an experience.

“I…didn’t really plan on becoming a thief.”

“You probably didn’t plan on becoming a stalker either, but here we are.” Rey flashed a teasing grin. “Don’t worry, though. I want you to slip something into his pocket.”

“What about you? Where did you grow up?” Ben couldn’t quite place Rey’s accent. It sounded somewhat British, but not quite. Diluted or blended with something else.

Rey froze for a moment, her back to Ben, before speaking. “I was born in England. We moved to Jakku when I was pretty young though.” She paused. “And I then I moved up here when I was seventeen.”

All Ben knew of Jakku was that it was in the Southwest and that some people claim it was the site of a Roswell-esque spaceship landing. He couldn’t fathom what would drive someone to make the move from England to a dusty tourist trap in the desert. The tone of Rey’s answer suggested finality though, so he didn’t pry.

“Hey. Did you know that Poe’s having an affair?” Rey moved towards a display of second-hand jewelry, ranging from pretty to tacky and Ben followed.

“He is?” How had he missed that? He wracked his brain, trying to visualize his notes and determine what aberration in the pattern he might have missed.

“Well. Kaydel is going to think he is.” Rey looked up at Ben and her mischievous smile had returned. She reached for a pair of earrings – small studs in the shape of a rose with a tiny red crystal in the center. “Step one. She’s going to find one of these in Poe’s pocket. It must have fallen off when he and the mystery woman were fooling around a bit. Got caught in the fabric of his pants. Does Kaydel have anything like this?”

“No. Kaydel wears hoops, usually. What if she doesn’t see it? It’s pretty small.”

“That’s why this is only step one. Don’t worry. I have more in store.” Her voice promised something a lot more sinister than the words themselves indicated.

And people said he had anger issues, Ben thought. Well, that wasn’t entirely it. People said he had temper problems. As he’d grown older, he’d kept that temper in check, for the most part. But as a kid – and as a younger man, in truth – he’d had a tendency towards outbursts. He hadn’t ever been a schemer like Rey. Her brand of anger was something else. He kind of admired it actually, even if it was a bit frightening.

Remind Ben never to get on Rey’s bad side.

Eventually, Ben and Rey made their way to The Resistance. Well, down the street from The
Resistance. New clothes had been dropped off at home, and Ben was now dressed in a Rey-approved pair of khakis and a pale blue shirt – single earring in hand.

They loitered at the corner, watching for Poe. It was about the time he typically left the pub for his afternoon break. Rey was perched on her Speeder. She’d be ready for Ben to hop on so they could zip away quickly if anything went wrong.

“Won’t he recognize your motorcycle?” Ben asked, nodding towards the Speeder. It was a sort of burnt orange color – not particularly bright, but not especially drab for a girl worried about blending in.

“Nah. I didn’t have a bike while I was dating Poe. My old AT-AT model bit the dust before we met and I just bought this one last month.” Her face took on a slight look of annoyance. “Well, technically I’m still working it off. I found it at a junkyard I work part time at.”

“You have time to work in between all of your scheming?” But he’d said it with a smile – getting back at Rey for her teasing. It came surprisingly easy. Or maybe he just actually enjoyed talking to another human after his recent weeks of isolation.

“You’re one to talk,” Rey smirked. “Oh! Look, here he comes. Ready?”

Ben sucked in his bottom lip – an old nervous habit – and then nodded.

Time for action.

He walked down the street, not entirely confident. He’d spent the better part of a month watching this guy’s every move – or nearly so – but he hadn’t ever envisioned making actual contact. And this maneuver was going to be kind of awkward.

He ran through the steps in his mind.

1. Knock his left shoulder into Poe’s right – make it hard enough to throw him a little off balance.
2. Say ‘sorry, excuse me’, politely.
3. While apologizing, reach out as if to steady the other man – act as though he was preventing him from stumbling, and finally,
4. Surreptitiously slip the earring into Poe’s pocket.

Easy. Maybe.

Or, it started out easy enough anyway. The whole exchange took only seconds. Ben crashed into Poe, with probably a little more force than necessary, but it worked and he hastily planted the earring.

Poe, despite not being at fault, clapped Ben on the shoulder and responded with a smile and his own causal “Sorry, man.”

Then Ben went off-script.

It was irrational, he knew. But that good-natured grin and meaningless apology set something off inside.

“Yeah, you should be sorry.” His voice was nearly a growl.

The smile dropped from Poe’s face and his expression grew unsure as he glanced up at Ben, “…I said sorry,” he repeated. He tried to step around Ben and keep going, but Ben dodged back in front
of him.

“And sorry is supposed to be enough?” Ben shoved the startled man back. He raised his voice and other pedestrians stopped to stare at the scene unfolding. “You just trampled all over another person, his life and ‘sorry, man’ is all you have to say?”

“I don’t … we barely bumped into each –” Poe started to respond, stumbling over his words in confusion. But he didn’t get to finish to finish his sentence before Ben’s fist landed squarely on his jaw.

Both men’s eyes widened in the moment before Poe fell backward, as if in slow motion, then Ben snapped back to his senses and fled as people began to crowd around the stunned man on the pavement.

He sprinted towards where Rey was waiting. She had her helmet on, of course, but Ben could swear he felt her shocked gaze trained on him. Unless that was just his own guilt.

He really hadn’t intended to punch the guy.

Ben jumped on the back of the motorcycle and held onto Rey’s waist as she peeled out.

“That wasn’t part of the plan,” she shouted over the roar of the engine.

“I don’t know what came over me.” It still felt unreal. Ben had had some issues with fighting in high school but it had been years since he’d been in a physical altercation. “You didn’t mind, did you?”

“Hell no, I didn’t mind!” Rey’s voice was filled glee. “How’d it feel?”

“Pretty damn good, actually,” Ben shouted back, though he shouldn’t admit it. A professor nearing thirty shouldn’t feel so happy about giving in to violence but it had been kind of freeing.

Rey laughed. “There’s hope for you yet.”

By nightfall, Ben hadn’t added a single word to any of his notebooks.

Any other day, he would have come back to his apartment and scribbled down every detail before he had the chance to forget. But he found he didn’t want to reduce the day to an occurrence marked on a chart. To simply write down that it had happened.

It wouldn’t be enough. It wouldn’t acknowledge the quick succession of emotions that had rocked through him – anger, exhilaration, panic. How long since he’d truly felt? In working to subdue his temper, Ben had often stifled his emotions as well, relying on the path set out in front of him, following his destiny. Things were typically smoother that way.

Today wasn’t smooth. It was jagged and messy and Ben had failed to predict his next move for once. He’d relished in it.

He did add something to his miscellaneous notebook, however.

When they had returned to the room, Rey had gone over to the kitchenette to put popcorn in the microwave (apparently movie night was going to be a thing) and Ben had opened his notebook,
staring at it before landing on the conclusion that this day hadn’t been something to chart.

Instead, when Rey came over to the sofa with a bowl of popcorn, she found Ben drawing. This was something else he hadn’t done in a long time. He’d enjoyed art in his youth, but hadn’t necessarily excelled at it. So though he’d taken a couple art classes in college for electives, the hobby had fallen by the wayside in recent years.

He was sketching out Poe’s face, just as a clenched fist made an impact with it, an expression of shock distorting the normally handsome features. It was imperfect, and a bit embellished – the incident had taken only seconds so Ben’s mind had to fill in a few details his memory had failed to capture – but it felt real. This was the memory that he wanted to keep.

“You’re an artist?” Rey asked, looking over his shoulder. “I thought you were all about math, math, math. Numbers, numbers, numbers.”

Ben felt his ears grow warm. He didn’t think of himself as an artist, and he certainly wasn’t used to people looking at his sketches. Not that there had been an opportunity in some time. He shifted a little in his seat and came up with a response that, while true, avoided directly answering the question.

“Math is an art.”

Rey rolled her eyes and shoved Ben’s shoulder. “Don’t be cheesy.”

The clatter of a doorknob and the yapping of a dog running towards it halted their conversation.

Kaydel, having arrived home an hour or so earlier, had been pulling leftover Thai takeout from the fridge when Poe opened the door. Unless Poe had texted her, she wouldn’t know that he’d been decked.

Kaydel turned to greet Poe and the foam box in her hand fell to the floor. Noodles and bamboo shoots splattered everywhere.

No. Clearly, he hadn’t texted her.

Rey reached out to turn the speaker up with a dangerous smile. “Here we go.”

“Babe! What happened?” Kaydel sidestepped the mess of food (and Bebe, who was nosing around in it now). She reached for Poe’s face, eyes focused on the nasty purple and yellow bruise blotched across his jaw and cheek.

Poe winced slightly at the touch. “I’m not even completely sure. I was outside the restaurant – this oaf wasn’t watching where he was going. We bumped into each other and when I apologized and tried to keep walking he just…lost it. Started hollering that I was stomping all over his life or something? And then he hauled off and punched me! Dude was unhinged.”

Rey poked Ben and giggled. “That’s you. The unhinged oaf.”

“It looks worse than I expected.” Ben stared at the bruise. The detail wasn’t crystal clear with his projector, but even so, he could tell it was bad. It was the kind that would linger. Inside him, pride and guilt competed for dominance.

“Eh. ‘Tis a flesh wound,” Rey quoted. “He’ll be fine. Look. Lady Lovelylocks is getting him ice already.”
Sure enough, Kaydel was putting ice in a baggie while Poe stooped to clean up the food mess.

“Well, there goes dinner,” he said with a smirk, dropping a bundle of styrofoam and paper towel into a trashcan.

“Did you call the police?” Kaydel held out the makeshift ice pack.

“And tell them what?” Poe shrugged. “He ran off before I even stood back up. Didn’t get a great look at him. Don’t worry so much. I’ve had worse.”

“If you’re sure…” Kaydel didn’t seem overly convinced.

“That’s city life, Doll. You run into a few weirdos.” He pulled Kaydel close to him. “Anyway, now I get to have you kiss it all better.”

“Ugh.” Both Rey and Ben made the sound of disgust at the same time. Rey turned the speaker down a bit. The couple across the way was standing fairly close to the hidden mic and no one wanted to hear the wet smacks of their kissing broadcast in stereo.

“When do you think she’ll find the earring?” Ben asked.

“It’s not a guarantee, unfortunately. We’ll just have to wait and see. If she undresses him tonight, it might be right away,” Rey said with a shrug. “But most likely, we’ll have to wait. If he leaves his clothes on the bathroom floor and she steps on the sharp part in bare feet? Or if she’s the one to do laundry the day those pants go into the wash, she might see the earring come tumbling out?”

“Why did we do it at all, if it has such a low probability of panning out?”

“I told you before. It’s just one of many things I’ve thought up. If we try enough of them, a few are bound to work.” Her optimism was a bit jarring, considering they were discussing sabotage.

“But today could have been all for nothing?”

Rey shook her head as she watched Poe’s face for a moment. Ben followed her eyes towards the garish bruise. It was kind of worth it – just seeing that pretty boy face marked up.

“No,” she said. Rey smiled at Ben – not her evil, plotting grin, but a small, genuine smile. “Today was not all for nothing.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, some things are shamelessly stolen from the movie. As I progress I think you'll see more differences however.

I know it's not a long chapter. But I felt like that was a good place for this one to end. Please let me know what you think. Feedback is love! :)
I wanted to make a quick note about my version of Ben and why he hasn't behaved as emotionally as we might expect. I think "emotional-outburst Ben" and "repressing-his-emotions Ben" can both fit in with what we've seen in canon. Yes, Ben was lead by emotions in The Last Jedi - but in The Force Awakens we saw him behave calculated and cold - acting on logic (Capture of Poe, Ordering the execution of the villagers), as well as lead by emotion and having outbursts (Murder of Lor San Tekka, nearly everything to do with Rey).

I believe that, though Ben (in Canon and otherwise) is sensitive and emotional in many ways, he's also been unable to fully and properly learn how to process his emotions. This is why he'll try to shut things down and exercise control - until he is overwhelmed and things boil over.

**Edited 9/4/18:** Just a few tweaks and changes. Massive thanks to @colliderofhadron for editing this and helping me fix mistakes and tidy things up!
Rey woke up, disoriented for a moment. It was a welcome change, being able to sprawl out on a bed for the first time in several weeks. It wasn’t a miracle mattress but it was a mattress.

She had felt just a little bad, making Ben curl and tuck his six-foot-plus self onto the sofa – not even a real sofa, but a short loveseat. But she’d been doing a lot of couch hopping following her unceremonious exit from Poe’s heart, and therefore loft - a place she had started to consider her home.

The nights spent in her friend Rose’s apartment were far more comfortable than when she’d crashed in the shack that served as office, break room, and storefront of Unkar Plutt’s Salvage Yard and Bargain Emporium. Rey wasn’t sure if she hated the days spent working with Plutt or the nights fending off his snarling guard dog, Greedo, more. Unfortunately, Rose lived out in the suburbs so the commute had sucked and, in the end, both places only provided narrow couches for her. So no, she didn’t let the vague twinge of guilt stop her enforcing the “take-turns” idea she’d come up with. Last night was her night for the bed, and that was that.

Rey rolled over and sighed in contentment. She flung her arms out wide just because she had room to. If there was sunlight to bask in, she’d feel like a cat. But of course, Ben’s curtains kept the room dark and cave-like. She knew it was for the camera contraption – to funnel the light in just the right way – but for a girl who had spent most of her years in the desert sun, it was off-putting.

On the other side of the room, she heard Ben stir. He sighed as well – definitely not in contentment – and then groaned as he sat up.

“That was the worst night sleep I’ve ever had.” He grumbled, rolling his shoulders and rubbing his neck. He looked at the wall. The loft was still and empty. “I overslept? Did I miss anything?”

“I just woke up myself.” Rey checked her phone. 9:45 am. Yikes. She had slept in. The notification bar also showed several unread messages. “It's really quiet over there. Poe might have taken Bebe down to the dog run.”

Ben sighed. “Well, I think I need a hot shower if I have any chance of standing up straight today.”
He stretched and grabbed some clothing on his way towards the bathroom.

“Alright, go soak your muscles, old man,” Rey laughed.

“I’m not old,” Ben muttered. “That couch is horrendous.”

“I know, I know. Hey! Remember, color!” Rey called.

“That stuff all smells like the thrift store. I smell like the thrift store from wearing it yesterday,” Ben replied, defending the wad of all black fabric in his arms.

“Fine. But you’ll listen to me about keeping a bit of extra distance today then, yeah? We’ll find a laundromat today too.” And a locksmith, she added to herself. She hadn’t let Ben have his key back yet and didn’t plan to until she had a copy. He seemed to finally be on board with her plan – enthusiastic, given how he’d socked Poe in the face – but still…just in case.

“Yes, mother.” Ben sighed as he disappeared into the bathroom. But Rey could see a slight smile on his face reflected in the mirror before the door shut. He wasn’t truly annoyed.

In the silence, Rey turned back to her phone to check her texts.

**Plutt:** Got an M. Falcon junker I need stripped for parts.

Rey rolled her eyes at the terseness of the text message.

**Rey:** Busy today. I’ll come to the yard tomorrow.

She opened the next thread to find messages from Rose. One of her only friends in Coruscant since the breakup (she and Poe had made “couple friends” – it was awkward to socialize with them now).

**Rose:** Hey, are you coming by tonight? Got Franklin Fortunate at the Red-Box :)

*Oops. That message was from 2 nights ago. How had Rey missed the notification?*

**Rose:** Are you okay? You never replied?

**Rose:** Rey??

**Rose:** Text me before I call the police or something…

Those were all from yesterday afternoon and evening. Rey felt guilty for worrying her friend but felt a smile cross her face at the same time. It was actually kind of nice that she had someone who *did* worry, though she didn’t want to put her in that position.

**Rey:** So sorry! :( Just been busy. Didn’t see your messages till just now.

Rose must have been near her phone, as she replied right away, several times in succession.

**Rose:** Thank God.

**Rose:** Just glad you’re safe.

**Rose:** I don’t really like you staying at that junkyard. Plutt gives me the creeps.

**Rey:** He gives everyone the creeps. But don’t worry. I’m actually not staying there
anymore.

**Rose:** Where are you staying then? You really can stay with me. Don’t wanna see you paying for some crappy motel.

Rey snorted at how close her friend's guess was to the mark. She wasn’t the one paying, but it was a fairly crappy hotel. She considered how to mention her current arrangement without…actually describing her current arrangement. “Oh yeah, I found someone to team up with in carrying out my revenge plot.” Rose wasn’t exactly aware of Rey's current…plans.

**Rey:** Just with a friend.

That didn’t fly. Rey should have known better. There was such a thing as being too vague. It let other people fill in the blanks.

**Rose:** *gasp* What kind of friend? ;)

Rey sent an eye-roll emoji while rolling her own eyes.

**Rose:** I should be telling you to be careful and not rush things. . .

**Rose:** But I’m glad you’re moving on from Poe. So I’ll let you do your rebound thing.

**Rey:** I didn’t say anything. You’re just inferring.

**Rose:** You didn’t deny either though so . . .

**Rose:** Just. Do be careful though… There are creeps out there. Was this a Tinder thing?

Yes, there are creeps out there, and my ex is one of them.

**Rey:** No, this wasn’t a Tinder thing. And yes, I’ll watch out. I can take care of myself. :)

All truthful answers. Even if they didn’t provide the whole truth. It might be better if Rose thought she was hooking up with someone. Rebound flings were normal after a breakup, right?

**Rose:** I know you can.

**Rose:** Hey, is he cute? ;) Send a pic :p

Ben walked out of the bathroom, dressed in black jeans and a black button-down shirt with subtle, barely-there gold stripes. Rey looked up at him and gestured to her phone.

“My friend thinks you’re a serial killer I found on Tinder but she wants a picture anyway.” She grinned. “Put your shades on and you’ll really look the part.”

Ben rolled his eyes as he made his way to the kitchenette and pulled a yogurt from the compact fridge.

“Hey, I mean it.” She had been joking when she’d first opened her mouth but found she actually wanted to send a picture to Rose. She wasn’t entirely sure if she was trying to impress her friend or frighten her.

She jumped up, fetched his sunglasses, and passed them to him as she opened her camera to selfie mode. Rey stood in front of Ben and tilted her phone to put them both in frame. It was hardly a
Glamour Shots portrait – Ben dressed nicely enough, but head to toe in black and Rey still in the moth-eaten Endor Gardens tee that served as her pajama top against the backdrop of a tacky motel room.

“Alright then, continue to look like a constipated grump…and perfect.”

As Rey snapped the photo, Ben’s lip twitched up slightly in response to her teasing, the tiny smile making him look just a little less ominous.

Ben found a laundromat down the street from the KZSO building (because of course he did) and he and Rey perched on the hard plastic chairs near the window so they could scope the station building while waiting for the dryer.

Rey kept it to herself since it had bothered Ben the last time she’d said it, but tailing Kaydel was boring. You couldn’t see into the station – it was a brick building with minimal windows. And Kaydel typically only left to do the occasional coffee and lunch runs, which was nothing to see.

But most of all, Rey wanted to devote her time to torturing Poe, which was hard to do from here. Ben had left his precious notebooks behind again, which was surprising though, and instead was helping Rey to spitball ideas to mess with Poe. Luckily, they were the only ones in the dinky laundromat and didn’t have to be especially discreet with their conversation.

Ben had pulled up a blog article on his phone titled “Tell-Tale Signs He’s Cheating On You.”

“Claims of ‘working longer,’ emotionally distant, altering plans. We can’t create these sort of situations though…” Ben looked up at Rey and she quickly schooled her face into an impassive mask.

Yeah, a lot of the things on the list sounded glaringly obvious in hindsight.

“We might be able to trick him into something that can look shady, though. I don’t know. Something to get him away from home more often. We’ll have to think about it.” Rey picked at the hem of her shirt. Inwardly, Rey cursed the nervousness she felt had seeped into her voice, and hoped Ben couldn’t hear it. “We’ll focus on the tangible stuff we can fake.”

“Like the earring?”

And so much more. Rey, unfortunately, had plenty of experience and memory to draw from here.

“Yeah, more of the classics – lipstick smudges on his clothes, getting perfume on him, receipts for dates she didn’t go on and gifts she never received…” Rey’s voice trailed off.

“Those things are kind of cliché, aren’t they?” Ben asked, “And how do we plant lipstick smudges onto his clothing? The earring was one thing…it might be a bit much for me to bump into Poe and try to kiss his collar or something.”

“Sometimes clichés become clichés precisely because they really are that common.” Rey couldn’t mask the bitter tone in her voice this time, and Ben’s eyes met hers, brows furrowed in concern. Rey didn’t want anyone’s pity. She plastered on a smile that she didn’t really feel, and continued. “As for
how we do it? We get creative.”

Ben was quiet for a moment, then nodded. He looked at the phone in his hands, as if seeking a distraction from the tense air in the room.

Apparently, he found one.

“Seeing his profile pop on your friend’s Tinder account,” Ben read aloud. “It would rely on Kaydel knowing someone that uses that app, and them opening it around her or showing her matches…but we could make a fake account and hope for the best, couldn’t we?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s good.” Rey nodded vigorously, glad to leave her display of weakness behind her, “I mean, it won’t be tied to his phone, but if he was going to do it, maybe he’d get a second phone anyway. More privacy that way.”

They continued to bounce ideas off each other until well after the dryer buzzed and Rey’s smile had become more natural than forced. Actual planning had devolved into impossible, wildest-dreams type plots that they could never pull off but were cathartic to joke about. Rey found herself laughing, genuinely, for the first time in a while, and she suspected the same was true for Ben. He could be pretty fun, not to mention funny when he wasn’t being so broody.

That evening, Rey sat cross-legged on the couch, forwarding pictures of Poe from her own cell to the prepaid phone they’d picked up on the way home to use for Poe’s fake accounts. After they had put it to use for a while, they could even plant it somewhere – maybe sneak into the loft. Kaydel would find it (filled with flirty texts, of course) and assume Poe was hiding a double life from her.

“You have that many pictures of him on your phone still?” Ben asked, leaning over Rey’s shoulder.

“Shut-up.”

“I mean, for someone who claims they don’t want their ex back…” Ben shrugged.

“I just don’t sort through my pictures all that often,” Rey said. She opened a blurry shot of a torn bar stool she had taken by accident when tucking her phone into her pocket once. “Unless you think I kept this for sentimental reasons?”

“Maybe it was a very special stool,” Ben replied with a playful grin.

Rey tapped through her phone’s gallery, selecting all the pictures of her and Poe. She’d transferred enough over. She met Ben’s eyes as she held the phone up to him, and deliberately tapped ‘delete.’ She stuck out her tongue as if to say ‘so there!’

“I was just teasing. I never meant…” Ben’s eyes widened. “You can never get those back now!”

“I know,” Rey said. “I meant what I said. I’m not you. I’m not in denial. I don’t want him back.”

“It’s not denial.” Ben’s voice was low. His eyes still held a guilty expression.

“Look, I’m not going to let you goad me into doing something I don’t want to. I deleted those pictures because I don’t need or want them anymore. So, drop it.”
Ben nodded. The room became quiet, aside from the murmur of the TV show Poe and Kaydel were watching and the loud crunch of Bebe eating kibble.

Rey huffed a sigh and reached over to snag the burner phone from Ben’s grasp. “What should we put in the ‘about’ section? Should it come across blatantly sleazy or do we want him to appear more genuine?”

“Sleazy. I don’t know if we want him to attract too much authentic interest.”

Rey nodded, “Good point.” She started typing up a profile full of unironic bragging and laden with innuendo too heavy-handed to be seen as funny.

“Shit!”

At the sound of the sudden expletive, Ben and Rey both whipped their heads back towards the projection. Poe was still sprawled out on the couch, but Kaydel was across the room, in the bathroom doorway.

“What’s the matter, Doll?” Poe called out from the sofa but didn’t bother to get up.

“You left your dirty clothes on the bathroom floor – again – and your pants….stabbed me!” Kaydel spat out, lifting her leg to get a better look at her heel.

“Sorry – my pants stabbed you?” Poe chuckled, finally standing up and walking towards Kaydel.

“Well, not the pants, she conceded, but...” She pulled the sharp object that had been jabbed into her skin and frowned at it in confusion. “…this did.” She held up a little rose earring, now sullied with her own blood.

“Oh, so it’s YOUR fault – dropping jewelry on the floor,” Poe said playfully, as he offered his arm for Kaydel to lean on.

She didn’t move. “No. This isn’t mine. I don’t have any earrings like this. And it definitely came from your pile of laundry,” she added, thumbing over her shoulder at the bathroom.

Poe leaned around Kaydel to look at the discarded laundry. He shrugged. “That’s what I wore to work yesterday. Must belong to a patron, I don’t know, maybe I swept it off the counter and into my pocket somehow.”

“Oh. A customer. Right.”

“I’ll take it in tomorrow, drop it in the Lost and Found bin. I mean, whoever it belongs to, they probably have no clue where they lost it, but you never know.”

“Yeah, ok.” Kaydel dropped the earring into Poe’s hand, then took his other arm and let him lead her back to the couch.

“That’s it?” Ben exclaimed as they watched the couple return to cuddling on the couch.

Rey couldn’t contain her giggle at Ben’s exasperation. He was clearly disappointed.

“I told you it might be nothing. You’re going to need to have patience.” Rey reached up and patted Ben’s head as if placating a small child. “It’s just an earring and Poe came up with a reasonable
excuse. But we’re planting the seeds. Kaydel will think back to this when he comes home smelling like perfume in a few days. It’ll pay off in time.”

She nodded back towards the wall. “In the meantime, you can just enjoy the lingering effects of your handiwork.” The bruise across Poe’s jaw and cheek almost looked worse today, the sickly yellow radiating out from the darker, swollen center.

Ben met Rey’s gaze with a smile. “That is a pretty nice upside.”

Chapter End Notes

I planned on more happening here but got caught up in just letting Ben and Rey talk? Oh, well. :) They are starting to get meaner with their plotting, but somehow sweeter. I expect this is going to be even fluffier than originally planned, despite the revenge and scheming....

- Unbeta’d.

Edited 9/4/18: No longer unbeta'd! Huge thanks to @colliderofhadron for not only beta'ing upcoming chapters but helping me go back and fix the old ones as well! Just some minor tweaks here.
The next day passed by slowly and felt oddly empty. Rey had taken off on her Harley Speeder early that morning (“work,” she’d said, “some of us need the money,” when Ben asked where she was going) and aside from asking Ben to run a couple errands, he’d been left mostly to his own devices.

Had he been so lonely since he’d come to Coruscant, that in only a couple of days he'd become so reliant on the presence of another human being?

Ben was no stranger to time spent alone. For all the weight and expectation of family around him – not only the living, but also the ancestors that stared down from their portraits in the halls of Chandrila University. He’d spent a lot of his youth alone. His parents had always been busy: running a university demanded a lot from Leia, and Han's work often had him traveling. Dinners and weekends spent by himself had been a normal expectation for him growing up.

Ben really hadn't thought that he minded it - he was far from the only latchkey kid of his generation. And anyway, loneliness was far preferable to the feeling of being trapped. Ben had spent the summers of high school volunteering in the Mayor’s office at his mother's insistence, ‘it'll look good on your transcript,’ she'd said, as if his eventual Alma Mater hadn't been chosen before his birth. That had been far worse than being alone. Mayor Snoke had seemed to know Ben's every thought and insecurity, stoking his anger by pitting him against the other youth volunteers, and making subtle, barbed comments about his abilities, his parents – anything that caused him the slightest doubt. During those long, dry, summer months, Ben had been constantly on edge and the slightest thing would set him off.

But in such a short time, Ben had gotten used to Rey's presence. Actual conversation, even when Rey was mocking him, was so much more real than talking to himself or the ghost of his girlfriend. Telling a joke or relaying a funny story is much better if someone is around to laugh at it, though, to be fair, she seemed to laugh more often when he’s not trying to be funny. And he’d be lying if he said sharing a meal – even microwave dinners – with someone wasn’t preferable to eating alone. Cooking for Kaydel had been one of his favorite pastimes, and watching her eat on his silent screen hadn’t been the same. Okay, so maybe those solitary dinners growing up had a bit more of an impact than he liked to admit.

Ben felt he was at a bit of a loss. He wasn’t sure how to fill the hours of the day. Picking up supplies (water pistols and perfume – a heady, floral scent that Kaydel, who preferred light, fruity body sprays, would never wear) hadn’t taken much time at all.
Ben tried to slip back into his previous routine, but he was out of sorts. He walked to Kaydel’s station to catch her making the coffee run, before realizing he was about an hour late for that, so he tried to catch Poe at the dog park, forgetting that he would have already been on his way to work by then. When he finally arrived outside The Resistance, Ben noticed he’d brought the wrong notebook.

Huffing a sigh, he sat down on a bench across the street and watched the entrance to the pub anyway. The lunch crowd started to stream in and though there were no significant occurrences to jot down (Poe wouldn’t emerge for some time), Ben felt himself itching to draw again. He flipped to a new page and began to sketch. Nothing of importance – a couple leaving the pub hand in hand, a stubborn flower sprouting up in the cracked sidewalk, a stray cat winding itself around the legs of patrons of a patio café.

As the lunch rush slowed to a trickle and died away, however, Ben found himself watching the entrance again. He could do what he used to do, only a handful of days ago. Wait for Poe to saunter out, follow him at a distance to the gym or Starbucks or wherever he’d kill a few hours before dinner today, hope to catch him doing something sinister or sketchy.

But he didn’t want to do the same old thing.

Before the idea was fully formed in his mind, Ben found himself crossing the street and walking right into The Resistance. He was inside, eyes adjusting slowly to the dim interior before he realized that he really didn’t have any sort of plan.

The bravado that had propelled him across the street abruptly deserted him. He couldn’t exactly confront Poe – it was too early for that and would disrupt the plans he and Rey had carefully hatched the day before. He really, really shouldn’t be drawing attention to himself. He should just turn around, leave before anyone paid him any attention.

Ben didn’t leave.

Against all reason, he continued through the near-empty pub, dingier in reality than the Facebook photos had conveyed, and sat down at the bar. Poe himself was behind the bar. As Ben had guessed, and Rey had confirmed, the man was very hands-on with the day-to-day operations of his restaurant, not the type of owner to sit in the back. Some would describe him as dedicated – Rey had scoffed, and implied that he just didn’t like to relinquish control.

Poe ambled towards Ben to take his order, trademark grin on his face. As he neared, a twinge of guilt fought with a pulse of satisfaction inside Ben as he witnessed the aftermath of their last encounter up close. It had only been two days since he’d given in to impulse and punched Poe, and the bruise, while it had faded a little, still looked quite sickly.

Thankfully, Poe didn’t seem to recognize him. Maybe it was the low lighting. Or maybe it was the fact that Poe hadn’t been watching and studying Ben for the better part of a month.

Either way, Poe took Ben’s order, shouted to the kitchen for a turkey burger on brioche, and poured his maple nut ale himself without incident.

At first.

As Ben picked at his meal and nursed his beer, he became uncomfortably aware of the fact that Poe’s eyes hadn’t left him in some time. He’d served the few other customers at the bar but then resumed leaning against the back counter, arms folded, watching Ben. A dark-skinned man emerged from the kitchen a few times to talk to Poe, but Poe’s gaze remained relentlessly trained on Ben throughout the brief exchanges.
Maybe he hadn’t gone unrecognized.

Ben began to eat faster, his head ducked close to the bar top. He was torn between slapping some money on the counter and fleeing or playing it cool, and hoping Poe would decide he didn’t recognize him after all.

*Why did you decide to come in here, dammit?* Ben berated himself, not for the first time.

No such luck.

Poe sidled over to where Ben sat, leaning across the bar and meeting his eyes directly. Ben was taller than the other man, but in this position, they were at equal heights.

“Enjoy your meal?” Poe was still smiling (*did he ever stop?*) but his eyes were narrowed.

“Everything was great,” Ben mumbled, trying to cast his eyes anywhere but Poe’s face.

“Nothing was ruined?”

“No.”

“Or *trampled*, if you prefer?” Poe’s smile had eased into more of a smirk.

“Um.”

“I should return the favor, you know.” Poe gestured towards his face.

Ben paled. He knew it would be worthless to play ignorant, but he tried anyway. “I don’t know what you mean, man.”

Poe laughed out loud at that. “I won’t though,” he continued, disregarding Ben’s denial and winking. “I’m a lover, not a fighter.” The man was *teasing* him.

Ben suppressed the urge to roll his eyes but allowed himself to breathe a small sigh of relief.

“Why?” Poe asked, his face grew serious but there was no malice in it.

“Why?” Ben repeated, dumbly.

“Why did you hit me? I don’t know you from Adam.”

Ben shifted in his seat and looked away. He couldn’t answer honestly, of course and, for some reason, he’d blundered into this place without previously having come up with a cover story. “I…”

“You’re jealous,” Poe offered.

Ben’s eyes snapped back to him. The easy, automatic answer was ‘no.’ He was angry, but he wasn’t jealous. Was he?

Poe filled a beer for himself and came around the bar to sit next to Ben, before continuing. “I’ve seen you around a few times.”

Ben’s stomach dropped but he didn’t say anything. Inside, he kicked himself yet again for this stupid action. He’d been spotted. *How often* had Poe noticed him? *Where? Please* say just around the restaurant. Rey was right, it seemed - he really wasn’t as subtle as he’d imagined.
If Poe minded his silence, he didn’t let on. Instead, his eyes grew wistful as he began to talk about himself. “You noticed me. Noticed that I’m younger than your typical restaurateur. Noticed how popular my place is. I’m young, successful, good looking – I’m a pilot too, bet you didn’t know that – never lacking when it comes to positive attention either.” At that Poe elbowed Ben and gave another wink.

Ben tensed but continued to sit in silence, lest he say the wrong thing and give himself away. Casually trading in Rey for Kaydel could be laughed about with a glib comment? Who did this guy think he was?

“And you?” Poe went on, “You don’t even have a job, do you? You just shuffle around downtown, wanting what’s not yours?”

Poe had hit closer to the truth than he realized but thankfully didn’t seem to comprehend who Ben really was and what exactly it was that he wanted. And it sounded like he had only noticed Ben in the vicinity around the pub, where loiterers were common anyway. Ben sighed, and for once was able to answer honestly – kind of. “I’m sort of taking a break.”

“If you need a job, man, I can help you out. We’re looking for a dishwasher for nights?” Poe offered. “No, I’m not looking for a job.” Or your pity.

“Well if you change your mind, let me know,” Poe said with a shrug. “I’m Poe, by the way.”

I know, Ben thought but didn’t say.

“And you are?”

“Kylo.” The name popped out without Ben’s permission, as it had the day he met Rey. He was mercifully prevented from digging the hole deeper when Poe’s eyebrows shot up as he held back a laugh. “Kylo Smith. My parents were big Celestial Battles fans,” he lied with a shrug.

At that Poe did laugh. “I think you need my help more than you’d admit,” he barked. “I’m sorry they did that to you.” He stood up and clapped a hand on Ben’s shoulder, “Don’t be a stranger, stop by anytime. Just…don’t hold it against me that I’ve made something from my life. If you want something, go for it. Don’t waste your time hating me.”

With that Poe sauntered out the door, leaving Ben to stare at his empty plate and wonder what exactly had just happened. He looked up to notice the employee he’d seen earlier, who had been watching the exchange from the kitchen doorway. He came forward, offering Ben a smile that was both warmer and more natural than Poe’s grin had been.

Up close, Ben could see his name tag. Finn.

“I know Poe can be a bit overwhelming,” he said, “but he’s a nice guy and a decent boss, you know. Need a refill?” The man – Finn – nodded towards Ben’s empty glass.

“No thanks,” Ben said, digging for his wallet. He’d been trapped in this place long enough. “And I don’t need a job offer based on pity.” He pulled a few bills from his wallet and smacked them onto the countertop. It was nearly double the cost of the beer and burger themselves but Ben felt the need to make a point to Poe about his needs, despite the fact that the man was nowhere around to witness the gesture.

When Ben finally stepped out of the pub, the city air, for all its perfume of smog and smoke and dumpsters had never felt so fresh and reinvigorating.
Short chapter after a long wait, I know. Sorry. I was in a fantasy mood and had a hard time writing down-to-earth. But the next update won't be so long in coming, promise!

Edited 10/17/18. Thank you again to @colliderofhadron for beta editing!
“I was watching your window

From here below

I think I just might stay here all day

Cause I gotta do something”

~*~*~

Rey sat on the floor, tinkering with her day’s find – a Polaroid camera that seemed to be in reasonable working order, aside from needing a little cleaning up. Plutt had allowed to her take it from the junkyard at no cost, deeming it worthless only because he wasn’t aware that film for it had recently been made available again. She had just been congratulating herself on the small victory when Ben dropped the bombshell.

“You went to the restaurant?” She frowned, looking up at him.

“Yup.” Ben sat on the loveseat, staring across at the projection, in spite of the fact that neither Poe nor Kaydel were home. There really wasn’t anything to watch.

“And you gave him an 80% tip?”

“Yup,” he repeated. “I mean, I didn’t stop to calculate it, but just about.”

“So you ate his food and gave him money and listened to him brag?” Rey recounted.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t think you understand the meaning of revenge, Ben,” Rey said, a smile playing across her face. “Patronizing his business isn’t exactly going to hurt him.”

Ben finally chuckled and relaxed into the couch cushions. “I know. I don’t know exactly how it happened.”

“Well, I’m not sure what you were thinking, going in there. We – and by we, I mean you – will have to be more careful.”

“About that…I said he’s noticed me before,” Ben admitted, casting a sheepish look at her. “Before the day I hit him, I mean.”

Rey’s eyes widened, in panic. She couldn’t afford for this to fall apart now. “I told you weren’t subtle. What exactly did he say? He’s noticed you, or us?”

“Just me. That’s the impression I got, anyway. He’s seen me loitering around near The Resistance. I
think he thinks I’m a bum.”

Rey exhaled a sigh of relief. “Okay. Good. Let’s not give him anything else to discover then, alright?”

Ben nodded. He glanced at the image of the empty lodge again, appearing lost in thought. “He was kind of nice, in a way.”

She gave Ben a death glare at that. “You’re not going to fall for his charms, too, are you?”

“No,” Ben continued. “He was nice but kind of a self-important jackass too, you know?”

“Yeah, that’s Poe alright,” Rey snorted.

“He offered me a job, too. Said he wanted to help me out.” He shook his head.

“Everyone’s hero,” Rey spat. She meant for it to come out as a joke, but couldn’t hold back her bitterness. Poe really did fancy himself some sort of heroic figure. It was something that Rey had found attractive, at one point. Until she’d realized how self-centered he was.

“Well, you’ll be glad to hear I didn’t take him up on it,” Ben said. “I need to keep my career options open,” he joked.

Rey smiled and resumed cleaning her new camera.

Rey had come back to the room in a bad mood, initially, even though she was happy about the free camera she brought home. Spending the day at Unkar Plutts Salvage Yard and Amazing Bargain Emporium was always bound to be unpleasant, despite the few truly amazing curiosities to be found there (and even fewer bargains), - the ogre didn’t pay well and was always grouchy. But it was a job, and one that afforded Rey a certain amount of freedom - in fact, she could pretty much decide when she felt like working, except when Plutt needed a car stripped for parts, in which case, he would usually be fairly demanding, since it was a task he couldn’t, or at least wouldn’t, perform himself.

She also liked scavenging for little treasures – tacky old jewelry, forgotten trinkets, and glass and metal parts waiting to be remade into something new. Rey was a hands-on artist. She reveled in building and creating physical works of art – whether jewelry, sculpture, what have you – especially when she was able to make something beautiful out of something that had been abandoned. Her paycheck suffered when she wanted to keep items she was supposed to be sorting and selling. But when she found the perfect little treasure that someone else had deemed garbage, she didn’t want to let it go.

However, Rey had felt herself relax since she’d arrived back at the apartment. Her tension and irritation from the day had melted away as she and Ben laughed about his afternoon. It was nice, talking to someone like this. Rose offered a friendly shoulder and an attentive ear whenever Rey wanted to rail about Poe, but she also had to keep her mission secret from Rose, so some topics were off the table when chatting with her best friend.

“He did always bring lots of food home from the pub. I do miss that,” Rey lamented. She didn’t necessarily mind the frozen food Ben had stocked his fridge with or the occasionally bland, if she were being truthful, food that Rose typically had on hand, being the health-nut that she was. She just liked food. It had been one of the perks of dating a guy who owned a restaurant, honestly.

Ben scoffed.

“You don’t like his food?” Rey asked. “Poe is very proud of the fact that he designed the menu. He
doesn’t usually do the cooking, but he’ll tell anyone who will listen that he’s the best at it.” She rolled her eyes, recalling his pretentious attitude. Rey did like Poe’s cooking – though she was hardly picky – but his puffed-up pride she could do without.

“It wasn’t bad,” Ben started. “It just wasn’t anything to write home about either. Switch out the bun, advertise that you’re using some fancy organic farm-to-table lettuce. It was still just an average burger.”

“Well,” Rey shrugged, “I spent a lot of time being hungry when I was a kid. Crappy foster homes, you know? So I guess I’m not too picky.”

When Ben didn’t reply, Rey looked up to find him gazing at her. She couldn’t fully read his expression, but there was a hint of sadness there. Rey tensed. She shouldn’t have said anything. She didn’t want Ben’s pity and began to tell him as much.

“Don’t look at me like I’m some tragic charity case to be pitied,” she said, eyes narrowed.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m not.” Ben held up his hands defensively. “I was just thinking…”

“Yes?” Rey was aware there was still a bit of an edge to her voice.

“We should have some real food. I’m going to cook you – us, I mean – something good.”

Rey considered. “Well…I won’t say no to that. But! Just because I never say ‘no’ to good food – not because I need you to feel sorry for me.”

“Of course. Anyway, I’m just sick of microwave dinners.” Ben stood up and gestured for Rey to join him as he crossed the short distance to the door. “Come on, we’ll have to buy ingredients though. I’m not exactly prepared.”

Rey set aside her camera and followed Ben out into the hall. As the door to the dim apartment clicked shut, the door to the bright loft across the street opened and Poe and Kaydel entered, without an audience for the first evening in some time.

Dinner ended up being rather late. The whole process took longer than planned, because Ben not only insisted on visiting three (three!) different grocery stores to find the freshest basil, but they had to stop to buy pans and mixing bowls and cutlery too.

Then, the smallest size pizza pan that Ben found would still be too big for the toaster oven, as the kitchenette in the apartment had an electric cooktop but didn’t have a real, full-size oven. They ended up having to go back out to buy foil from the corner store to fabricate a makeshift baking tray.

Oh. And Ben had to make his pizza dough from scratch. Because of course, he did.

The end result – a particularly herby Pizza Margherita and a slightly sweet eggplant dish he called Caponata. It was admittedly very tasty, but that wasn’t going to stop Rey from teasing him a bit, though.

“You know, I’m not sure you’re convincing me that you’re any less pretentious about food than Poe,” she smirked, taking a gulp of her wine from her coffee mug, since that’s all they had in the
apartment. When Ben said he was making Italian food, Rey insisted on buying wine to have along with it. Cheap, Rodian wine from the tiny liquor store down the street, but still.

“Is it pretentious if it’s actually better?” Ben said, then flushed. “I mean, I’m not fishing for compliments but—”

“Don’t worry, I’m kidding. It beats Pizza Hut, anyway.” Rey took another bite and bumped her shoulder against Ben’s, encouraging him to relax.

They were sitting side by side on the sofa, as they typically did during dinner. Poe and Kaydel had gone to bed by the time they settled in, so the entertainment for the evening consisted of Bebe’s occasional visits to her water bowl.

“It’s the rosemary,” Ben explained, ignoring the Pizza Hut comment. “It’s not a traditional herb for Pizza Margherita – you just stick with basil usually. But this is how Elsie always made it. Most recipes I know by heart, I learned from her.”

“Is that your grandmother or aunt or something?”

“She was…sort of my nanny?” Ben tilted his head to the side and considered. “She worked for my family before I was born as a live-in housekeeper and cook so that wasn’t always her role. But then she took care of me a lot growing up. I think I spent more time with her than I did my parents. She fielded parent-teacher meetings, took me to my clubs and lessons. Once my mother came in to pick me up early when I was sick – I don’t know if the office staff had actually seen her in person before then.”

Rey wanted to roll her eyes at the fact that Ben had had a nanny. He’d vaguely mentioned his family before – without saying it outright, she got the impression that he came from old money. She’d looked up the college he mentioned working at – a prestigious, private college that wasn’t just his employer, but his family legacy. Figures, that’d he’d have had a nanny too.

But she could hear the wistfulness in his voice and it gave her pause.

“I wonder if that’s what she wanted.” Ben’s question was little more than a whisper; Rey wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly.

“What do you mean?”

“To be my pseudo parent. She wasn’t supposed to be a nanny. She was always nice to me, but as I got older, I wondered if she resented my parents for expecting that from her,” he confessed.

Ben had taken out his contacts, swapping them for his wire-framed glasses. Typically glasses were thought to make a person look refined or distinguished; he didn’t look particularly undistinguished, but the glasses somehow had the effect of making him seem younger – an effect only heightened by the vulnerability in his voice as he spoke.

Oh.

Rey didn’t have to guess what he was getting at. She knew the feeling all too well – looking into someone’s eyes and trying to see whether they really cared about you at all, or if they cared because they had to.

Sometimes it had been easy; some of her foster families had been open in their distaste of her – she was a way to get a monthly check from the state. Others had been nicer, seemed to really like her, but no one ever wanted to keep her for the long haul, and when she’d get shuttled off, placed in a
new home, she’d look back over her shoulder, wondering.

For all the disparity in their upbringings, they clearly both spent a lot of time wishing that the people who were supposed to love them best were around.

She couldn’t say all that, though. Couldn’t put it all out into the open with no way to hide it away again. Instead, Rey reached over and gave Ben’s hand a small, empathetic squeeze and said, “I know what you mean.”

It would have to be enough.

He searched her eyes, and maybe he saw a little of what she couldn’t say in there because he nodded and squeezed back.

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Chapter End Notes

I know this ended up short, and I wasn’t quite sure about ending it where I did. But the other scene I was trying to incorporate was just fighting me. It wouldn’t flow here.

Not sure if the portrayal of Plutt’s junkyard is truly accurate. My vision basically comes from an episode of Monk that features a junkyard – lots of literal junk, cars that don’t run and can only serve for parts, some interesting signs and antique type stuff… It’s essentially an outdoor thrift store but with more car parts and machinery. The name of the place though, I couldn’t help myself, is inspired by Brave Little Toaster, lol.

Edited 10/18/18: Thank you so much @colliderofhadron!!
"And while I wait

I put on my perfume, yeah I want it all over you

I'm gonna mark my territory"

~*~*~

The next week or so passed by without much fanfare, each day blending one into the next in an easy rhythm. Rey hadn’t expanded on the vague comments she’d made about her childhood and Ben didn’t press. It hadn’t been much, but somehow the moment had lingered, and something grew softer in the air between them. Oh, Rey still teased him mercilessly for wanting Kaydel back, but there was a little less bite in it. Maybe that small kernel of understanding had led them to judge each other a little less harshly.

Or, maybe it was just about the food. Ben had taken to cooking more often since he was trapped in the apartment (Rey wanted him to lay low and stay off of Poe’s radar for a bit and he had to agree) and Rey really liked to eat. Maybe that was the way to get on someone’s good side.

Rey worked a couple of shifts at the junkyard, and on those days, Ben sketched. On the days she stayed at the apartment with him, they worked and plotted.

They hauled their clothes and bedding down to the laundromat (because mundane things such as that still needed to be tended to) and liked profiles and sent messages from the tinder profile they’d set up for Poe while waiting for the dryer to finish. Rey took control of the messaging. She told Ben she didn’t want to lead anybody on, and so aimed to strike a tone that was just obnoxious enough that the person on the other side would end communication first, without crossing the line.

They also perfected the water-to-perfume ratio they’d be using in the water guns Ben had picked up. It was an idea Rey devised: they could hide somewhere in the park that Poe crossed on his way to and from work and spray him with the mixture. Straight perfume would be too much, but if the scent was too subtle, it would fade too quickly. The perfect blend would linger in the fabric of his clothes, and catch Kaydel’s attention.

The beauty of the plan, Rey had pointed out, was that Poe could deny any wrongdoing and tell the absolute truth, but it would sound absurd to Kaydel. Who would believe a rouge trickster was squirting passerby with expensive perfume?

In the evening, Poe and Kaydel become a new source of entertainment. Of course, they listened in to see if they could glean any useful tidbits – instances of one or the other becoming irritated the other (sadly, no) or mentions of future plans they could disrupt (this they had a bit more luck with).

But when they grew bored with watching the couple debate theories about the murder-mystery show they liked to watch or relay stories about their days at work (Ben insisted to Rey that Kaydel wasn’t boring – she was just boring with Poe; Rey had laughed and thrown an olive at him), they turned down the volume and made up their fake conversations between the two. It was like a Bad Lip
Reading video (though probably not particularly amusing to anyone but themselves). Ben hadn’t realized that plotting someone else’s downfall could actually be fun.

Ben had noticed that working for Plutt usually set Rey on edge, so one afternoon he decided to have something tasty ready for her when she returned. As Ben was making caramel French toast, a noise from the loft caught his attention. He had the speakers on, though turned low, but it sounded like Rey? *Cooing at Bebe?* Ben abandoned the skillet and turned towards the projection.

It was indeed Rey, cooing at Bebe.

> “You miss me girl, don’t you? I miss you.” She was just inside the door; Bebe had come skittering over when it opened, and recognizing Rey, proceeded to jump and lick at her. “Too bad your person isn’t as sweet as you.” Rey scratched Bebe behind the ears and ruffled her fur for a moment, then came rose again and came towards the window.

> “Psst!” she said, in an exaggerated, fake whisper. “Ben! Are you there or am I talking to myself?”

Ben was dumbstruck. Of course, he couldn’t answer. But what was she doing there? It was nearly five; Kaydel would be home soon.

> Rey grinned in the direction of the blacked out curtain in their room and held up a Ziplock baggie with a trout in it and winked conspiratorially. “Just a spur of the moment idea,” she announced.

Suddenly Ben became aware of the scent of burning sugar filling the air.

> “Shit!” He turned back to the kitchenette to scrape the charred piece of French toast from the pan and into the trash with a sigh. Fortunately, he’d already piled several pieces onto the plate. It would probably be enough. Ben looked over his shoulder but the loft was empty again.

Only a couple minutes passed and Rey sauntered into the apartment. “Ugh, what is that smell?” She was more cheerful than she usually was after a day at the junkyard.

> “Well, I was cooking dinner when someone distracted me and I burned it,” Ben explained. Rey looked mildly disappointed, so he hastened to add, “Most of it’s fine though.” He gestured towards the countertop.

> “Ooh, French toast!” Rey stepped past Ben to dish up a plate.

> “What were you doing over there? Wasn’t that kind of dangerous? I mean, you said yourself we need to lay low.” Ben got his own plate though and followed Rey to the loveseat to eat.

> “I said you needed to lay low,” Ray clarified between bites, “but I wasn’t going to get caught. I was in and out. And look, they still aren’t home yet.” She nodded towards the projection.

> “That still leaves the why,” Ben repeated.

The mischievous grin that Rey had worn when she smiled towards the camera obscura returned. “If you were watching me, didn’t you see the fish?”

> “I saw you had a fish,” Ben said, “but then I was busy trying to save dinner.”

> “Well, I don’t *have* a fish anymore. It’s now resting peacefully in a very cozy and secure hiding
Ben actually laughed out loud, the type of guffaw that shook his body. It was very obvious now that he thought about it a moment. It wasn’t exactly the most sophisticated prank, but that didn’t mean the idea of Poe wracking his brain trying to figure out why his apartment stank wasn’t going to be hilarious.

“It’s frozen right now, so it’ll be a few days before they notice, but it will pay off,” Rey said, with a shrug of her shoulders. “And speaking of frozen…” She pulled a smaller zippered baggie from her jacket pocket.

Ben shrugged as his laughter died down; he was confused again. It looked like a homemade ice pack.

“Poe’s rainy day credit card. I would think, if I were going to carry on an affair, I’d use a separate card to pay for dates and things, right?” Rey dropped her bag in between them on the couch. “We just have to wait for it to thaw, then we can go wild with it. And when Kaydel sees the bill, all hell will break loose.”

“Rey, that’s actual fraud.” Ben could hear the nervousness creep into his voice and felt a little embarrassed. Why exactly, he didn’t know. Surely it was reasonable to worry about committing credit card fraud, right? Not that it was going to stop him, but…

“So we’ll be careful not to get caught. Or if you’re not up for it, I’ll do this part myself,” Rey said.

“No, no,” Ben insisted, “I’ll do it, I’m up for it. Just figured someone should state the obvious first.” He wasn’t exactly thrilled, but it would really help move their scheme along.

Also, a part of him didn’t relish the idea of Rey doing something so risky alone. It wasn’t as if he would be of any help if they were caught – they would just be two people in trouble instead of one. But they were both already pretty well tangled up in this web by now, so why stop?

“So, what do you have in mind?” Ben asked.

“Oh, I have a few ideas…”

The next morning, Ben awoke to find Rey standing over him, the light from the projector surrounding her like a halo. She held one of the water pistols in her hand and gave it a twirl, like something from an old cowboy movie. “Today’s the day.”

Groggy, Ben sat up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and retrieved his glasses. The blurred edges of Rey’s form sharpened into focus and he could read the eagerness and excitement in the wicked grin on her face. Rey always woke up with more energy than he, even when it hadn’t been his turn to sleep on the sofa.

“Poe just left for the airfield,” she continued. “Remember that he’s giving a lesson this morning. It’s the perfect opportunity. He even told Kaydel he’d pick up lunch on his way home, so his shirt will dry by the time he gets to her. I had been a bit worried about that.”

Ben remembered. When Poe mentioned he had a client this weekend, they realized it was a situation
that would work out well. The smell of the perfume won’t be able to be dismissed as part of the general scent of patrons from the pub saturating the air and clinging to his clothing.

“Right, perfect. How much time do we have?” Ben rose from his makeshift bed and walked over to the kitchenette. Thank God, Rey had made coffee already. He poured a cup, stirring in what Rey called an obscene amount of creamer (she took her coffee black). It was one of his little indulgences.

“Introductory lessons are usually ninety minutes, so we have some time, but I don’t want to wait too long. Sometimes they run early or late and we don’t want to miss him,” Rey explained.

Ben nodded, and after downing his coffee, he hurried to put in his contacts and get dressed. Within twenty minutes, he and Rey had staked out a spot in the park to watch for Poe. The airfield was further than the Pub, but Rey knew from past experience he’d still cross the park to get to the bus he rode out there.

Being a weekend, it was pretty crowded, which made for good cover. They’d laid out on a blanket under a tree, watching for Poe under the guise of being a couple that was merely relaxing and enjoying the mild weather together. Rey had picked a spot near the playground filled with rambunctious children so that Poe might assume he was just an unintended victim in a kid’s game when he got squirted.

Ben was dressed in some baggy blue jeans and a worn flannel with a knit beanie, despite the warmth of the summer afternoon. At least there was a slight breeze. He’d asked Rey if this wasn’t the exact kind of out of place, noticeable get-up that she would have condemned before, but she insisted that right now, it was more important to hide Ben’s noticeable features now that Poe had spotted Ben.

“Including that L’Oréal commercial hair,” she had said, tugging the hat low over his black locks. She’d then traced the moles on his face like a dot-to-dot puzzle and added, “You’re lucky I’m not making you wear makeup over these, but I don’t want to take the time.”

Rey had worked to disguise herself as well. Instead of her usual buns or ponytails, Rey had curled her hair and pinned it underneath, achieving a bobbed style that appeared shorter than it was. She’d also opted to wear a light, sleeveless romper – lavender with daisies all over it – rather than the earth-toned pants and practical tops she usually wore.

“It’s not that I don’t like this sort of style,” Rey had said as she turned in front of the bathroom mirror, “but I don’t always get the chance. Junkyards and motorcycles don’t usually play nice with this much bare skin, you know?” From the doorway, Ben had just mumbled his agreement and looked away, feeling a bit guilty and embarrassed for noticing just how impossibly long her golden legs looked in the outfit.

Here, in the open air, it was easier to look away. Ben lay on his back, head resting on his arm and glancing over the top of Rey’s head at the path through the park, watching for Poe’s distinctive leather jacket. Next to him, Rey was on her stomach, pretending to scroll through Facebook on her phone while actually looking over the top edge to study the passerby from a different angle.

“Ok, best toppings for a hot dog?” Rey asked. The morning had inched by slowly as they waited for Poe’s return, so Rey had begun a back-and-forth round of questions to pass the time. Ben had been asking normal questions, like favorite movie or color; Rey’s seemed a lot more random.

“Hot dogs are barely even food, Rey,” Ben replied.

“Don’t be pretentious. I’ve seen you eat plenty of junk food. Those microwave “steak” dinners you had in the freezer? Come on.” Rey kept watching the park but Ben could hear the smirk in her voice.
“Favorite hotdog toppings.”

“That was for convenience, not taste. But chili cheese dogs, I guess. If you’re going to go for it, go all out, right? How about you?”

“Hot dogs are one thing I actually am picky about. They have to be grilled – none of that boiled or steamed nonsense. And the best toppings are spicy mustard and onions.”

“So not a good first date food for either of us then, I guess?” Ben asked wryly, eliciting a chuckle from Rey. “Favorite flower?” he asked next, eyes darting to the floral pattern on her romper.

“Desert Dandelion. It’s actually not a dandelion at all. It’s a sunflower. But they grow wild in the desert, despite the harsh climate. I admire their resilience, I guess.”

Ben knew Rey wasn’t just talking about a flower then, and when he nodded in agreement about the admiration of resilience, he wasn’t either.

“There’s a magnolia tree outside my mother’s home. My great-grandfather planted it for my great-grandmother and it’s still there. Those are my favorite flowers.”

Rey smiled and nodded. “I can see that.” Then she gasped. “Oh, look! Incoming.” She nodded towards the far end of the park, towards a sauntering Poe. She put her phone down, pushed herself up and surreptitiously reached for one of the water pistols.

Ben turned on his side and reached for his own water gun, propping himself up on one elbow. Collectively, he and Rey held their breaths and waited for Poe to move into range. They weren’t too close to the sidewalk, so hopefully, he wouldn’t glance their way, but they hadn’t been able to choose a spot too far back either.

However, as Poe drew nearer Ben actually felt confident. His focus was honed in on the target and the sounds of the park-goers around them faded away. When Poe was a few feet down the path, Ben whispered, “Now.”

Quick as lightning, he and Rey aimed and pulled their triggers, pelting Poe with streams of perfumed water. He jumped back, startled, and began to look around himself in confusion. Ben dropped his water gun at his side, looking away, because as fun as it would be to watch Poe flounder, he didn’t want to draw attention to himself.

In one quick motion, Rey dropped her own pistol and turned toward Ben, pushing him back down and draping herself across his chest. Her face was suddenly very, very close to his own. Her eyes were filled with laughter but she bit her lip to keep it inside.

“How about you?” she whispered, “Put your arms around me.”

Ben just blinked, stunned and confused. Rey rolled her eyes. “If he’s trying at all to see who shot him, he’ll think we’re just a random couple making out,” she explained, bringing one hand up to cup the side of Ben’s face.

“Oh,” Ben finally responded, snaking one hand around her waist and placing the other on her upper back, holding her close. He insisted to himself that his sudden increase in heart rate was due solely to the thrill of carrying out their plan and getting away with it. He began to go cross-eyed, trying to look at someone so close to his face, and let his eyes flutter closed. “Now what?”

“We wait a minute or two, I guess. Make sure he’s moved on.” Rey’s breath fanned across his face; they were practically breathing the same air. Definitely no onion breath, Ben thought to himself,
Without thinking about it, almost instinctively, Ben lazily stroked his hand up and down Rey’s back. He briefly considered that it might be too much, but then decided this would probably look more believable if he didn’t resemble a wax statue. Rey clearly was on the same page because she caressed her thumb across his cheek and trailed her fingertip around the shell of his ear.

“Hey, leave my elephant ears alone,” Ben muttered, flushing. His ears were always a sore spot for him, which is why he typically wore his hair long. Most of it was tucked under the hat right now, however.

“They’re not that big,” Rey said. Ben just snorted. “Ok, they’re big. But they’re…distinctive. Cute, even.”

Ben opened his eyes and raised his eyebrows skeptically. Rey just giggled and pinched his ear. Anyone walking by would see them and think PDA. The slightest shift and the minimal space left between them would vanish. Ben wasn’t sure why but his breath caught a little at that thought.

And then Rey spoke. “So if you had to, would you rather eat a can of cat food or two rotten tomatoes?”

The force of Ben’s laughter almost shook Rey off his chest. “Where do you come up with these things?”

“I’m creative. Now, answer the question.” Rey’s teasing smirk was back. “You don’t get to put any seasonings or sauce on to mask the taste.”

“The cat food. It’s meant to be eaten.”

“I ate cat food once, on a dare. It was disgusting, but I could handle it again.” Rey lifted her head and glanced around. “He’s gone.”

Rey scooted back off Ben’s chest, then stood up and held her hand out to him, helping to pull him to his feet. They snatched up the blanket they’d been laying on and tossed the water pistols into a nearby trashcan. “Disposing of the evidence,” Rey said with a snicker.

And then the two set off at a sprint, hoping to beat Poe home and witness the fallout when Kaydel smelled the perfume.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm. Cuddling on a blanket and getting-to-know-you questions… Is it just me or did these two just accidentally have an almost-date? ;)

And thanks to everyone who’s been reading. I hadn't written fiction in some time and have really been enjoying writing again. And it is so uplifting to know that people are getting joy from reading this. So, thanks again. :) :) :)
Edited as of 11/13/18: Thank you so much @colliderofhadron you're the best!
Kaydel wore a small frown. She’d been typing on her laptop when Poe had walked in, arms laden with pints of spicy shrimp soup and baguettes. Kaydel had gotten up to greet Poe at the door and relieve him of the take-out containers. She’d paused for a moment, a look of confusion passing over her features, and then proceeded to take her soup container to the table, with a small shake of her head.

Rey turned to Ben, grinning wildly. “Let the show begin,” she said.

She was still a little breathless from running all the way back to the apartment. Her hair had fallen from its careful bob and probably looked a mess by now, but she was too hyped up to care. With Poe stopping to pick up an order from a café around the corner, she and Ben had made it upstairs and into their front row (only row) seats before he got home.

Ben responded with a nervous smile of his own before turning back to the projection on the wall. He bounced his foot as he stared, clearly antsy to find out whether the plan had succeeded. Rey gave a small sigh. Didn’t he trust her on this yet?

She reached out and put her hand on his knee, stilling him. “Don’t worry. Didn’t you see the look on her face when he came in? We’ve got this.”

Ben nodded, more to himself than to her. “And you really don’t think he noticed us in the park?” He asked, turning his worried brown eyes toward her.

“No,” she answered emphatically. She visualized what Poe would have seen if he’d glanced over: some random, amorous couple making out – or so it would have seemed from his perspective. Some couple that didn’t exist. Not Ben and Rey.

“Or if he did, he didn’t recognize or suspect us. He saw what we wanted him to see,” she concluded with a firm nod.

“Right, right. What we wanted him to see,” Ben repeated and glanced back towards the projection. He reached towards the speaker set to turn up the volume.

“How was your lesson?” Kaydel asked, studying Poe over her soup.

“Alright, same as always. Today we covered the basics.” Poe reached past Kaydel for the salt shaker and she inhaled deeply as he did so. “He signed up for a six-week course.”
“You said he’s an older man, right?”

Poe didn’t seem to notice “That’s right. A retired accountant. Wants some excitement in his twilight years I guess.”

“Excitement,” Kaydel parroted in a low murmur.

“So, what did you get up to today, Doll?”

But Kaydel ignored Poe’s query and instead blurted, “And was this ‘old guy’ wearing Chanel?”

“Huh?” Poe looked genuinely confused.

“Told ya,” Rey said, bumping against Ben’s shoulder with her own. “Here we go.”


“What? Oh. OH!” Poe tugged the collar of his shirt towards his nose. He breathed in and realization blossomed in his eyes.

“Were you really giving a lesson today?” Her voice was quiet and unsure.

Poe stiffened. “Of course I was. You know I cut across Naboo Park on my way home from the station? I was minding my own business and suddenly, out of nowhere, I was getting sprayed with water. I don’t know, some kids with water guns or something.” He sniffed at his clothes again. “I didn’t notice it then, but it must have been perfume. Kids playing a prank, I guess.”

“You’re right,” Ben told Rey with a chuckle, “That does sound really fake.”

“Doesn’t it? Would you buy a nonsense story like that?” Rey watched with as doubt and anger clouded over Kaydel’s features. It had been the truth – or very close to it – but it clearly sounded like a bad lie to her ears.

“Some kids. Bought perfume – not the cheap stuff by the way. And squirted it at random people in the park?” Kaydel’s voice was flat.

Poe actually looked sheepish. He had to know how pitiful the excuse sounded, even though his defense was sincere. “I don’t know. I know it sounds weird but that’s what happened!”

Kaydel didn’t respond, just looked away from Poe’s pleading eyes and towards her soup.

“Kaydel. Doll. Kay-Kay.” Poe ducked his head low to try to catch Kaydel’s eye. “You trust me, right? Why would I make up something so off the wall?”

Rey rolled her eyes and thought she might hurl at Poe’s simpering. The man wasn’t exactly creative with his pet names. How many times had he pleaded for her to trust him with “Doll” and “Rey-Rey?” Kaydel though…Kaydel hadn’t heard the denials time and again yet. (And then there was the fact that THIS time anyway, the denial was genuine…)

Kaydel finally lifted her head and met Poe’s eyes, searching for something in them. He smiled his toothpaste-ad grin and leaned in to kiss her soundly. She returned the kiss but
Rey sat back with a sigh. The high that came from successfully carrying out her plan started to dissipate. It had worked. There hadn’t been a big fight, but Rey hadn’t predicted one. The eventual catastrophe was still being built up. She could see the gears starting to turn in Kaydel’s mind. The scene was exactly what Rey had expected – the apprehension, worry, and doubt.

But she hadn’t planned on the familiarity being quite so difficult to witness.

After a moment, Rey remembered she wasn’t watching this by herself. Aside from the chatter – now stilted chatter – coming through the speaker, this apartment was rather quiet. Rey turned towards Ben. He was watching her, not the couple across the street. Noticing the hint of…something (worry? confusion?) etched on his face, Rey pasted a bright smile on her own.

“Don’t tell me you’re feeling guilty, Solo,” she teased, trying to control the direction of the conversation and hoping her voice sounded natural, not strained.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.” Ben stumbled over his words. “That went well, right? Or not…not well I guess. But how it was supposed to? According to plan?” The look in his eyes said he wanted to ask a different question.

“Yes. Completely according to plan.” The words were awkward in Rey’s mouth. She knew exactly what he was really asking.

Yes, she’d been in Kaydel's shoes before, ignoring the weight in her heart as she forgave Poe.
“Ah, no. Poe and I aren’t together anymore.”

“Good. I never liked him anyway,” Maz said with a huff. She turned to Ben and introduced herself. “Maz, proprietor of this old watering hole. And you are?”

“Ben Solo.” Ben politely extended a hand to shake Maz’s, but she narrowed her eyes for a moment as she took it.

“Solo?” She leaned closer, considering, then her eyes widened and her smile grew impossibly wider. “Are you Han’s boy? You are! I knew I recognized those eyes!

“Um.” Ben was caught off guard and even in the low light of the dim tavern, Rey could see his face coloring. “Yeah. You know my father?”

“Wait, your father is Han Solo? You’re related to that Solo? The daredevil?” Rey looked up in surprise. Ben’s last name wasn’t exactly common but it wasn’t as if it was unheard of either. She hadn’t expected this uptight scholar to be the son of a professional stunt driver and daredevil.

“Han and I go way back,” Maz said. “Before this old bird decided to settle down, I used to travel on some of the same fair circuits as him. How is Chewie these days?” she asked with a wistful smile and a bit of a longing glint in her eye.

“Chewie?” Rey asked. “Interesting name.”

“My uncle, of sorts. Not actually family, but…” Ben shrugged. “Pete Chewbacca, officially. But I only ever knew him as Uncle Chewie.” To Maz, he added, “I actually haven’t been in touch with him or my father in a while. They’ve been…on the road.”

“Han never was one to stay in one place,” Maz said with a nod. Then she raised herself up on her toes to nudge Rey with her elbow and give her an exaggerated wink. “Ditching that other one was the right move, girl. A Solo man is an upgrade.”

Ben let out a strangled coughing sound and the slight pink flush to his cheeks blossomed into a deep red. Rey felt her own face warm and she froze for a moment before stuttering out, “Uh, no. No, we’re not together. Ben is just a, uh, friend.”

“Hmm.” Maz just nodded but her eyes remained skeptical.

“Really,” Rey insisted.

Just then the little string of bells hanging on the door jingled as a new patron entered the bar, and Rey and Ben took the moment to escape Maz’s watchful gaze and made their way over to a table in the corner.

“That was interesting,” Rey said as she sank into a chair, breaking the awkward silence that had begun to grow.

“Yeah, small world.”

“You know, you told me about your mom and the college and all? I have a hard time picturing a guy who blows up cars and rides motorcycles through hoops of flame for a living fitting into that world.”

“He didn’t,” Ben said shortly. “That’s why he wasn’t around much.”

“That sucks,” Rey replied, bluntly. Many people might have offered a polite ‘I’m Sorry’ to that
admission but Rey hated hearing that herself. It always sounded hollow, however well-intended it might be. She’d rather stick with honesty.

“Yeah, it did.” Ben agreed. “I know he loved us – loves us. But...he and my mother clashed, to say the least, and he never liked standing still.”

Maybe that was why Ben tried so hard to cling to stability. Rey kept the thought to herself as Maz appeared by their table, a bottle of Rey’s favorite hard cider in one hand and an aged Corellian whiskey on the rocks in the other.

Ben blinked in surprise as Maz placed the whiskey in front of him. “Um.”

Rey giggled at Ben’s confusion.

“Your father’s favorite. Do you share his tastes?” Maz asked.

“Typically more of a beer man,” Ben replied, “But thanks.”

“Well, it’s on the house. I might not have seen you since you were in diapers, and you don’t remember me, but still a family friend all the same.” Maz patted Ben’s hand. “I’ll bring you a pint though as well. I’ll pick a good local brew for you.”

Rey took a swig of her drink and suppressed a grin as Ben took a small sip of the strong whiskey.

“Ok, so back to work, then,” she said. “Let’s see the list.”

Ben pulled his small notebook from his pocket and opened it up to the page he and Rey had been working on the prior evening. It contained a list of ideas for how to use Poe’s credit card to create a paper trail for Poe’s fake affair:

- Restaurants/bars (Fancy date places? Or dive bars to imply an attempt at secrecy?)
- Lingerie store
- Flowers (Or other gift delivery service?)
- Motel?
- Tracfone minutes

The final one was Ben’s idea. If Poe was using a secret card for an affair, why not refill his phone minutes with it, rather than pay cash for phone cards at the store? Rey was actually proud of Ben’s ingenuity. He was finally really getting into the swing of things.

“We should start small,” Ben said. “Too many big-ticket items too quickly will get the account flagged.”

“Right, so we’ll wait on things like booking a hotel room. Anyway, that needs to coincide with Poe or Kaydel being tied up at work or out of town or something. Even if we use a seedy hourly place, we have to make sure it’s not on some day when they meet each other for lunch or something,” Rey said.

Ben nodded. “Good thinking. I say we start with ordering something small, flowers or something –”

“Oh, let’s send Rose – my friend that thought you were a serial killer, remember – an edible arrangement. The gift has to go somewhere and she loves chocolate covered strawberries.” Rey interrupted. She smiled. “She’s usually a total health-nut but that’s one of her weaknesses, or so she says. Me? I say fruit is fruit, right?”
“Yeah, we can do that. And then maybe get dinner someplace not too pricey – like I said, we don’t want the early charges to be too extravagant.”

As they wrapped up planning, one drink turned in to two and a basket of onion rings, and then Rey and Ben shifted to other topics, the conversation flowing smoothly, naturally.

Ben asked Rey about the box of broken glass and tiles she’d brought home from Plutt’s the other day and Rey found herself telling him about the mosaic she had planned – a somewhat surreal version of nighttime in the desert. Ben turned to a blank page in the notebook and sketched as she talked – his quick doodle matching the vision she explained rather well as if he was looking inside her head, not just hearing her words.

Rey suddenly wished she had brought her Polaroid camera along – the film she’d ordered for it had arrived the other day. Inexplicably she wanted a picture of Ben’s illustration to keep alongside her final piece when the mosaic was done. She liked the raw reality that an instant camera captured (as opposed to digital cameras, where one could take and retake a picture until it was perfect) and had already “wasted” some of the expensive films just having fun.

But for today, she would have to settle for digital. Rey pulled out her phone and snapped a picture of Ben’s drawing. Embarrassed, he leaned back to ensure he kept out of the shot. Rey hadn’t originally intended to capture Ben, but this move only encouraged her. She snapped multiple shots of Ben ducking and holding up his hands until she finally caught his shy smile and pink-tipped ears in the frame.

Ben told Rey a bit more about his job back home; though she could surmise that he had essentially been on a planned career path since he was in diapers, Rey could hear the real passion in his voice when he talked about the subject.

“So many people hate math, call it their least favorite subject,” he said. “If you approach it from the right direction, they see how interesting and exciting it can be.”

“I guess they just need the right teacher,” Rey teased, watching him blush.

After two beers and finishing the whiskey, Ben excused himself to the bathroom and Maz suddenly appeared by Rey’s side again. She raised her eyebrows at Rey with a knowing glance.

“What?” Rey asked. Under Maz’s intense stare, her face felt warm and flushed. She solidly attributed it to an effect of more than one hard cider; Rey wasn’t exactly a heavy drinker.

“Maz didn’t know what she was talking about – just a bored bartender looking for entertainment and...
seeing something that wasn’t there. That was all.

Really.

Chapter End Notes

So I hope the shift in tone didn't throw anyone off. In canon Rey at times doesn't want to let things go (waiting for her parents) but at times is eager to move on (how she presented herself during the battle of Crait, not wanting to linger on what had happened on the Supremacy). Both stem from not wanting to process or fully address something painful. So that's what happened a bit here - she's fine with getting revenge on Poe, but it can be harder to confront the fact that she had been hurt.

Thanks again for reading! I hope you enjoy! :)

**Edited 11/13/18 - Thanks again to my beta @colliderofhadron :)**
"Would you like to see our dessert menu?" The waiter gave Ben and Rey a bland smile as he gathered their empty plates.

Kaydel was at a work function that Poe had opted not to go to, making it the perfect night to go out for dinner with his card.

As Ben opened his mouth to respond in the negative, Rey piped up, "Oh, yes please!"

The waiter balanced the two dirty plates on one hand and pulled a plastic-covered menu card from his apron pocket with the other. "I'll give you two a moment to look it over."

"Hungry?" Ben asked as the waiter walked away. Not unkindly, just a little surprised. They hadn't exactly skimped on the meal, ordering appetizers before their entrees, and wine along with them.

"Have you met me?" Rey replied with a smile. He supposed she had a point. "Anyway, when Poe's trying to impress someone he goes for all the frills. Plus, he’s picking up the tab. We are so getting dessert."

"All the frills at a place with plastic menus and fake driftwood and fishing nets on the wall? I still don't understand the beach motif here by the way; we're over 24 hours from the coast."

"You're the one that said somewhere not too fancy," she said, shrugging. "Besides, Poe and I actually came here once when we were dating. Anyway, why? Were you above chain restaurants when taking Kaydel out?"

"Not at all. Just amused by the phrase you used." The question lingered with Ben though. Had he not taken Kaydel out often enough? They'd grown up together, been high school sweethearts, which had easily evolved into college sweethearts. They'd fallen into a rhythm by the time they’d emerged from their teens - they were together, they didn't need to date.

Or so Ben had thought. Maybe he’d taken it all for granted?

"Ok, so what do you want then?" he asked, reaching for his glass instead of dwelling on that thought.

"We need to pick something to share. That's more romantic, more of a date thing," Rey said, in a rather matter-of-fact tone. "And chocolate, since people consider it an aphrodisiac."

Ben nearly choked on his drink. "Um, I don't think the charge will show up itemized. We don't have
Ben didn't see how that would work, given his previous encounters with Poe. He didn't point that out though. "You think he'd be that sloppy? If this were real?"

"Yes," Rey said. She continued to stare at the menu, pointedly not meeting Ben's eyes.

Again, he became uncomfortably aware that Rey wasn't pulling these ideas from thin air. The silence seemed to stretch out between them.

Finally, the server came back and Rey turned to him with her cheerful smile – the catalog version. Ben had begun to notice the difference between this one and the grin she sported when actually enjoying herself. "We'll have the molten chocolate lava cake, please."

When the dessert arrived, Rey dug in, and Ben knew she was only partially avoiding talking. The cake did look good.

He leaned over the table and took a forkful. It tasted good too.

Idly, Ben considered the 'couple feeding each other' cliché and wondered if it was an actual thing that couples did or whether it only occurred in the movies? He couldn't draw from his own experiences; Ben didn't think he'd shared a dessert with Kaydel since splitting pudding cups at day camp.

Absentmindedly, and unbidden, his brain supplied a visual starring himself lifting a forkful of cake to Rey's mouth, and gently running his thumb over the corner of her lips to remove an aberrant droplet of chocolate syrup.

His fork dropped to the table with a clatter.

Where had that come from?

Ben glanced across the table at Rey, who was innocently chowing down on the cake. She raised an eyebrow in question. Probably wondering why he was sitting there blushing over cake.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. Just...butterfingers, I guess." Ben shook his head slightly to himself.

He let Rey polish off the cake while he retrieved the card that Rey had given him for safekeeping, waiting for the server to return with their bill.

"Thanks for dinner, Dameron," he said with a slight smirk, tapping the card on the table.

Rey smiled and lifted her nearly-empty wine glass. "To Poe – at least you're good for something."

A couple of days later, Ben accompanied Rey on her next trip to the junkyard. She wasn't actually...
going there to work; she just wanted to sell some computer parts and wire she’d picked up from a curb alert the other day. They would head there first, then do a little more shopping courtesy of Poe’s credit card on the way home.

It didn’t go exactly as planned.

Rey’s boss, Unkar Plutt was a heavy man with mottled skin, unfortunate pit stains and a hard glint in his eyes. Ben might have felt guilty about looking down on the man’s appearance if his demeanor hadn’t reinforced the negative first impression.

Arms laden with bags, Ben and Rey awkwardly entered the stuffy shack that passed for Plutt’s shop. The repulsive man looked up from his desk and glared first at Rey, then at Ben, then back to Rey again, as if deciding whether to treat the newcomer as a potential customer or an extension of Rey.

Apparently, he decided on the latter. That, or he was in the habit of treating both customers and employees equally like shit.

“What?” the man barked out, returning his gaze to the small tv perched on his desk. “I don’t have any work for you right now. Been too slow ’round here.”

“I’m so disappointed,” Rey replied, in a tone that said she absolutely wasn’t.

Maybe business wouldn’t be so slow if Plutt displayed even an ounce of politeness. The irony wasn’t lost on Ben. He knew he himself had been…gruff, to say the least, in his younger years, though he’d made an effort to grow beyond that - something this guy didn’t seem interested in.

Rey took a small breath and, when she spoke again, adopted a more conciliatory tone. “I was hoping to sell, actually. I’ve got some decent stuff here.”

At that cue, Ben stepped forward and dropped the bag onto the desk. Rey did the same, and Plutt feigned indifference as he began digging through the piles. He shrugged and named a figure that, even without Rey’s offended gasp, Ben could recognize as a low ball offer.

“Did you not notice the copper wiring in there? And I’ve already stripped it from the casing. You don’t even have to work for it!” Rey burst out, incensed.

“Yeah, I saw it. Do you know for sure it wasn’t stolen?” Plutt growled.

“Of course it’s not stolen!” Rey was indignant.

She couldn’t know for sure, but there was no reason to assume it was. Ben had been with Rey when she had responded to a Craigslist posting for a bunch of stuff – mostly junk – that was being left out on the curbside for free, and he’d had helped her strip the copper from the shabby mixture of cable and electronic cords. But there couldn’t possibly be anything sketchy about this find, and Ben was sure Plutt knew that too. The man was clearly just trying to find a way to cheat Rey.

Plutt nodded his fat head towards the door. “And you still owe me for the bike. I see it’s running quite well.”

“It runs like a dream, no thanks to you,” Rey said proudly, before her voice took on a harder edge. “But we agreed on a work exchange. I’ve put in the hours you agreed to.”

“I clearly should have demanded more,” Plutt said with a shrug. “I could have sold it for a pretty penny.”
“Yeah, after I put my own blood, sweat and money into it!” Rey was practically shaking. “You can’t change the price now. That’s not fair!”

“I still have the title,” Plutt pointed out.

Ben watched as Rey’s face paled, making her smattering of freckles stand out more.

"But..." Rey's voice trailed off. She didn't have an argument for that.

Ben realized, belatedly, that his fingernails were digging little crescents into his palm - he hadn't even noticed he'd begun to clench his fists. Anger quickly rose inside him, not unlike the day he'd punched Poe.

Who did this slob think he was? Why did he think it was ok to treat people like this? Ben hadn't known Rey that long, but he knew she hadn't done anything to deserve being strung along like this.

His fury was paired with a certain clarity, however, and he didn't have to work very hard to repress the urge to get physical.

"Give her the title," he said. Rey turned and looked at Ben, surprised, and a little shocked too. He didn't blame her - his voice sounded dangerous and cold even to his own ears.

Plutt blinked, clearly caught off guard. But he recovered. "The girl still owes me. She tried to fleece me, I'm not getting ripped off."

Internally, Ben scoffed. Plutt was clearly the scam artist. Out loud he asked, "How much do you claim she still owes?"

Plutt rattled off a ludicrous price and Ben and Rey rolled their eyes in tandem. But Ben pulled out his wallet, removing several twenties - just a bit less than half of what Plutt had demanded.

"This is what you're getting." Ben laid the bills on the desk. "You can keep the scrap too and I won't pulverize your face" he said icily. "Now fetch the title, sign it over, and we'll be on our way."

"You can't just --" Plutt began to stammer.

"Ben!" Rey hissed, her voice low.

"The title," Ben repeated. The tone of his voice left no room for argument.

Plutt stood up, looking Ben up and down. Upon taking in his height and build, he opted not to challenge him and, instead, ambled over to a file cabinet, muttering under his breath as he did so.

"Just a piece of junk, anyway, not worth the hassle," he grumbled, as if to placate himself. But when he looked over his shoulder at Ben, there was a nervous look in his eyes.

"You don't need to do this," Rey whispered, so Plutt couldn't hear. The shock was still evident in her face, but an undercurrent of irritation had crept in as well.

"It'll be better to have him out of our hair," Ben answered in a low voice.

Plutt made his way back to the desk and began hastily filling out the transfer of ownership form. His eyes darted warily up towards Ben, several times.

"Here," he said finally, holding the document up. "Take it and scram."
Rey snatched the title from Plutt’s meaty hands and folded it up, tucking it into her jacket pocket.

Ben glanced down at her then, glaring daggers at the man, impulsively said, "And Rey will be in touch if she wants to work for you again. You can stop demanding her to cater to your whims."

He put a hand on her back, and guided a stunned, silent Rey out of the building towards the motorcycle.

But, as soon as the door swung shut, Rey turned her fiery gaze on him. “That was out of line, Ben!”

"The guy is a jerk, Rey," Ben replied, incredulous at her outburst.

"You think I don’t know that? It doesn’t mean I want you telling off my boss!"

"I was trying to help!” he said defensively. “The way he was talking to you... It just... I don’t know...” Ben finally let his words trail off into a sigh. He couldn't quite explain why it had grated on him so much.

"I get that,” Rey huffed in exasperation. "But I'm a big girl. I don't need you to fight my battles."

"I wasn't trying to undermine you," Ben said, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. The adrenaline had begun to dissipate and he knew he had acted kind of brutally.

“I don’t like owing people,” Rey said, her fire diminishing.

“You don’t. You don’t need to pay me back or any—“

Rey cut him off with a withering glare. Then, as her gaze flickered between him and the dingy office window, she realized Plutt was watching them.

"Come on. We're not going to talk here," she sighed as she warily regarded Plutt. She grabbed her helmet and climbed onto the bike, motioning for Ben to follow suit. At least it would be more comfortable without the bulging bags of scrap and hunks of metal strapped to the side.

Ben donned his own helmet, a second-hand model they’d picked up the same day Rey had made him buy new clothes, and mounted the motorcycle behind her, hands tightly holding to her waist for stability.

"This isn't over, yet," Rey said, before starting the engine and the noise effectively put a halt to any further conversation.

Rey didn’t bring up the showdown at Unkar Plutt’s place for the rest of the day. Ben felt a little bad about upsetting her, but couldn’t stifle a hint of relief at the thought that she wouldn’t be under that pig’s thumb anymore.

After departing the junkyard (for the last time, Ben hoped), they ran a couple of other errands: picking up groceries (their compact fridge didn’t hold much and they were going through more now Ben was cooking ‘real’ food), scoping out a few more places for ‘Poe’ to take ‘the other woman’ to, and buying some decidedly un-Kaydel-ish lingerie that Rey planned on sneaking into the loft one of
these days.

When they got home, Rey turned on the speaker so they could listen in on Poe and Kaydel, but neither she nor Ben paid much attention to the couple across the street. Ben cooked sausage and pancakes (he wasn’t always able to rustle up a gourmet meal and, anyway, Rey had a sweet tooth) while she scrolled through Poe’s Tinder feed, reading the tackiest profiles aloud to Ben before swiping right.

By the time food was ready, Poe was taking a shower and Kaydel was hunched over a notebook with headphones in her ears.

*That was fine. Ben wasn’t really in the mood to watch the happy couple simper over each other anyway.*

So Ben and Rey crowded around the Netflix app on Ben’s phone to watch old episodes of Celestial Battles, as Rey never missed an opportunity to tease Ben about introducing himself as Kylo Ren when they’d first met. As he squinted at the tiny screen, he really regretted leaving his laptop at home, but, then again, he hadn’t expected to be here so long.

In between episodes, Rey pulled up the site for *Grape Expectations* and ordered an elaborate fruit and chocolate basket to be sent to her friend, using Poe’s card.

They stayed up far too late, switching to Star Trek and laughing at the special effects, but had secretly enjoyed the story lines more than they cared to admit. Poe and Kaydel had headed to bed long before Ben and Rey realized how late it was and decided to get to sleep themselves.

Ben had happily taken his turn sprawling out on the bed, while Rey spread out a sheet and blanket and tucked herself in the loveseat. He’d nearly drifted off, and was just walking that precipice between wakefulness and sleep when Rey’s voice called him back to consciousness.

“Hey, you should let me sleep here.”

Disoriented, he opened his eyes and squinted at Rey standing above him, backlit by the projection behind her. Without his glasses or contacts, everything was slightly blurry and the faint glow of moonlight surrounded Rey’s form like a soft halo.

He blinked. Finally, he found his voice.

“It’s my night for the bed,” he argued. He didn’t want to give up his place in order to curl up on the cramped love seat. “Is this some sort of punishment for today? You know, most people would be thankful?”

Rey huffed and Ben felt rather than saw her eye-roll. “It was nice, ok, I do appreciate it. You still should have checked with me first. But no, that’s not what I’m saying.”

She knelt on the edge of the bed and nudged Ben’s shoulder. “I’m just tired of that stupid couch and I know you are too. So scoot over. There’s room for both of us.”

“Both of us?” Ben repeated, unsure of how to respond. It was an unexpected suggestion, sure, but it shouldn’t make him feel nervous, should it?

“Yeah, both of us. This is a full; we can share.”

“Oh, uh, alright.” Ben stuttered over his words as he shifted away from the middle of the bed, making room for her as he tried to make sense of his reaction.
Rey climbed all the way in and curled up on her side, facing the middle of the bed. Ben mirrored her. They lay in an easy quiet for a few moments, eyes closed but neither asleep. Now that he’d been awakened, he knew sleep wasn’t going to return to him so easily.

“Thank you,” Rey said suddenly, so softly Ben wasn’t sure he’d actually heard her at first.

He opened his eyes. She was much closer than before. It was easy to focus on her even without his glasses as this distance.

“For Plutt,” she continued. She took a small, shaky breath. “I’ve gotten pretty good at taking care of myself. But it was kind of nice, having someone stand up for me. I’m…not used to that.”

Ben felt a pang of sorrow in his chest. It wasn’t right. A person should have someone in their life to lean on, someone they could count on to stand up for them.

Ben wasn’t actually entirely sure he had ever had such a rock either – his mother loved him and he used to have Kaydel, but had he actually ever shown them that he needed them? Ben tended to keep people at arm’s length. But he might blame himself for that.

Rey, however… Someone so vibrant and full of life shouldn’t be made to feel alone like that.

Of course, he didn’t say any of that out loud, and swallowed before speaking. “You’re welcome. You’re right, though – I shouldn’t have made presumptions without checking with you.”

Rey laughed lightly. “It’s ok. I guess there wasn’t much of an opportunity for that.” She shrugged, rustling the blanket wrapped around her. “I am going to pay you back though. I was serious about not being indebted to people.”

“You really don’t need to. Think of all the money I’ve saved on Ubers and bus fare by hitching a ride with you,” Ben joked. He also didn’t want Rey to pay him back because Plutt had been so out of line, changing the terms of payment. The man hadn’t deserved a cent, but Ben had known that offering some sort of settlement would help push the slug to give in. Rey shouldn’t have to be on the hook for that.

Rey snorted a short laugh. “Well, I’d prefer it all the same.”

“You don’t mind using Poe’s money,” Ben pointed out.

“Completely different. That’s tactical.”

Ben rolled his eyes. She clearly wasn’t going to give it up, but he could be just as stubborn, and would just keep refusing.

“This isn’t over,” he said, throwing her words from earlier back at her, “but I’m not going to fight you anymore tonight.”

“That’s because you know I’ll win,” Rey answered with a smirk.

“Goodnight, Rey,” he sighed.

“Goodnight, Ben.”

As it turned out, sleep found Ben a lot quicker than he had anticipated.
So sorry this one took awhile. And it was a chapter I'd been looking forward to writing! But some writer's block hit me anyway. :/ I didn't spend as much time editing as I would have liked, so let me know if you notice anything that needs fixed :)

I hope you enjoyed it. Our stubborn babies are taking some more baby steps! And the bed sharing trope has made its appearance - yay!

And I am on tumblr by the way. Come talk Reylo with me :) @orkindofamazing

Edited May 2019: Hugest of thanks to the brilliant @colliderofhadron for beta'ing! :)
I'm On The Hunt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Stalked in the forest, too close to hide

I'll be upon you by the moonlight side

High blood drumming on your skin, it's so tight

You feel my heat, I'm just a moment behind"

~*_~*_~

Rey had woken first, thankfully.

It had taken her a moment to orient herself and recognize the source of heat. The solid bulk of flannel and cotton and warm was coming from Ben's side of the bed, and she was curled against him like an overgrown cat. He lay sprawled on his back and, at some point, she'd made a pillow of his outstretched arm.

Rey was comfortable and reluctant to let go but not terribly inclined to be caught like this. There was probably something, hidden somewhere within her psyche, to dissect about an empty childhood spent craving attention, but she really didn't want to look too deeply into the willingness with which her unconscious, sleeping-self had cuddled up to the first warm body sharing her bed in recent months.

Still, to avoid any embarrassment, Rey had quickly hopped out of bed and escaped to the shower. By the time she emerged, Ben was up and brewing coffee in the cheap electric pot the room was provided with. He couldn't have been up for long - he was still wearing his sleep clothes and hadn't put in his contacts yet.

"Sleep well?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Yeah," Rey answered, maybe just a little embarrassed of how well. "Much better than the couch," she added with a grin, rather than blurtling some truly humiliating truth such as 'you make a really good teddy bear'.

Ben poured two mugs of coffee and passed one to her. As he leaned against the counter, Rey thought he looked comically large in the small nook that served as the kitchenette.

"Do we have something particular planned for today, or are we winging it?" he asked, sipping his unsettlingly pale coffee.

"Want to scope out the dog park?" She pointed to her camera sitting on the dresser top. "Getting a
shot from the right angle could make a friendly conversation look a lot less innocent. Especially when it involves Poe. I don't think the man knows how to hold a conversation without flirting."

"Sounds good. Disguises?"

Rey nodded. There would be a lot of people at the park, but it would be important to blend in with the crowd in such a wide open space, particularly now that Poe knew both their faces.

"Keep your glasses on," she instructed, "and I'll pick out your outfit after I have some caffeine in me."

Once she'd downed her coffee, she sent Ben to the bathroom with an outfit ("Rey, I haven't worn shorts in years!", "Isn't that the point? Not looking like yourself?") to shower and change while Rey picked out something for herself. It was of greater importance that she be unrecognizable.

Simple had always been Rey's style, by circumstance and necessity rather than preference. First as a child, because she had to take what was offered to her (and none of the families she stayed with ever offered more than the essentials) and then, when she was on her own as a young adult, because she needed a wardrobe of affordable, neutral basics that she could mix and match (and that were sturdy enough to withstand the wear-and -wash her jobs tended to demand).

However, she'd always had a certain appreciation for soft fabric and vibrant color. Maybe precisely because they represented a luxury she didn't often allow herself indulge in. So, when she'd selected a few items at the thrift store, the fact that they were things Poe hadn't seen her wear was only part of the reason.

Rey slipped on a light pink sundress with a row of succulents embroidered along the hem of the skirt and a green ribbon tied around the waist. It was nice to wear something impractical just because it was pretty.

They'd clearly be walking to the park rather than taking her bike - not much of a sacrifice on such a nice day, though.

Ben stepped out of the bathroom as Rey was combing her fingers through her hair, having braided it after her shower so that it would dry in waves. She felt his gaze before she caught a glimpse of him, spying him behind her in her makeup compact's little mirror.

She turned and smiled. In long plaid shorts and an ironic tee shirt, Ben didn't look like the mafia hitman she'd first met lurking around Poe and Kaydel's frequent haunts, nor the PTA dad on the day he'd encountered Poe, when he'd worn the khakis Rey had chosen for him. Perfect.

"You-" Ben cleared his throat and began again. "You look really, um, nice."

"Thanks." Rey looked back in her mirror and gave her hair a last once-over. "I wear my hair up so much of the time that just leaving it down aids in my cover-up."

"It suits you," Ben replied. Then he looked away as if he'd said something wrong.

"Speaking of hair, let me do something with yours," she said, pulling him over to the loveseat. "Sit."

He did as Rey bid and she began to comb his hair. It was soft. Almost annoyingly so.

"OK, what faerie or demon did you sell your soul to?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry?" Ben's response was utter confusion.
"This mane is not the hair of mere mortals. It's otherworldly. I've been stealing your shampoo and conditioner since I started staying here and my hair doesn't feel like this."

Ben chuckled. "Ah, but have you been stealing my weekly oil treatment?"

"I will now." Rey twisted an elastic into his hair and handed her compact to him. "There. The look is complete."

"A man-bun?" He tilted the compact in his hand, trying to squeeze his whole head into the reflection.

"Yes, a bun." Rey leaned over and rested her chin on Ben's shoulder so she could meet his eyes in the small mirror. "You totally pull it off."

"I keep my hair long to cover my ears. Putting my hair up like this defeats the purpose."

"Good." Rey stuck out her tongue as a mock-bratty retort. "I told you before, they give you character."

"Cartoon character," he muttered. "I look like some hipster college kid. I'm too old for this."

"'Kid!'" Rey scoffed, standing back up to full height. Then she asked, "How old are you anyway?"

"I'll be thirty this year." Ben almost looked surprised by his own answer, as if the milestone had snuck up on him.

"That's not too old for this look," Rey said with a shrug. "Besides, Poe is older than you and he has a closet full of kitschy tees. Who cares?"

"He's older than me?"

"Yup. Thirty-three." He'd broken up with Rey not two weeks after she'd gone all out on his birthday surprise. One of their last good moments (or, good-on-the-surface moments, rather) before the shit hit the fan, but Rey didn't volunteer that extra information.

"I guess I never thought about it explicitly - I think I expected him to be younger than me."

"He's certainly less mature."

"Doesn't that make him a bit old for you?"

Rey snorted. "I'm twenty-three. That's hardly a child."

"Well at least I haven't been contributing to the delinquency of a minor," he said. "I didn't know I should've been carding you before giving you wine."

"Shut up," Rey laughed, punching Ben's shoulder playfully. "Anyway, we should go, if we want to get to the park before Poe brings Bebe."

Rey grabbed her camera and Ben his notebook and they headed out. The mid-July air was hot as the sun beat down on them but an occasional breeze kept the heat from becoming unbearable. Finding a bench in the park with an unobstructed view of the dog run, they and sat in silence as they waited for Poe to show up, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one. Ben was absorbed in sketching something in his notebook while Rey scrolled through job listings on her phone. She had no plans of groveling before Plutt to get her job back, and while she wasn't going to miss him in any way, that did mean she needed to find another source of income.
Her phone dinged twice in quick succession and notifications of a new text popped up at the top of her screen.

**New Message from Rose: WTH??**

**New Message from Rose: <picture>**

Rey tapped the notice to open the thread and load the image.

The picture was of a massive arrangement of chocolate-covered strawberries, as well as pineapple slices and assorted berries on sticks along with candy flowers in a glass vase. Rose's kitchen table was a tiny, round two-person table but it looked even smaller with the edible bouquet in the center.

Rey had intentionally picked an over the top arrangement since Poe's card was footing the bill, but it was admittedly even more exorbitant than she had expected. She snickered to herself as she imagined Rose's face when she had accepted the delivery. The card they'd included was merely signed "from someone who cares xoxo," but she must have recognized Rey's handwriting.

**Rey:** What? Don't you like it?

**Rose:** So it was you.

**Rose:** I mean, sure I like it... It looks delicious. But WHY?

**Rey:** Maybe I just wanted to do something nice for a friend.

**Rose:** -_- Hmm

**Rey:** What does that mean?

**Rose:** It means you're acting strangely. You haven't been around in a month, haven't even texted in a couple weeks, and THIS shows up at my door out of the blue?

Rey chewed on her lower lip. Her behavior must have looked odd from Rose's perspective. But she was at a loss as to how to explain herself since she had to keep her mission a secret.

**Rose:** Is this some way to get my attention?

**Rose:** Are you OK?

**Rose:** Did something happen with that guy? If he hurt you istg...

**Rose:** You're not staying at Plutt's shop again, are you?

**Rey:** NO

**Rey:** I'm fine. We're fine.

**Rey:** I've been pretty happy actually. Maybe I wanted to share that happiness with a friend. :)

OK, so it was a cheesy comment but it was all she could come up with to placate Rose. And as she reflected, it wasn't a total lie. She had felt happier lately.

**Rose:** It must have cost a fortune.
It did.

**Rey:** Don't worry about that. Just eat it. *nom nom*

**Rose:** I want to see you, Rey, make sure you're OK. Really OK.

**Rey:** I am. But I’ve missed you too. Let's get together some time.

**Rose:** I don't work today. Wanna get dinner?

**Rose:** Bring your guy along. I need to vet him.

Rey looked up from her phone and turned to Ben. He snapped his notebook shut, his face red.

"Up for a performance tonight?" Rey asked.

"Meaning?"

"Rose received our special delivery today. Now she wants to meet you. Make sure she approves of us *dating,*" she said with a grin.

Ben swallowed thickly. "So by *performance,* you're saying she needs to be convinced we're *together?* So...?"

Rey rolled her eyes. "She isn't going to ask for a copy of our sex tape or something. Just walk in holding hands, little touches. That sort of thing."

Ben nodded without speaking. Rey turned back to her phone to text Rose.

**Rey:** Sure. When and where?

Just then, Rey heard a familiar bark. Bebe was bounding cheerfully along on her lead with Poe in tow. They entered the gate into the dog run and Poe let Bebe off her leash to run around.

"Oh, here's our guy," she said, lifting her camera and elbowing Ben. "Let's see if he gives us anything good."

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Poe did *not* give them anything good.

He tossed Bebe's worn tennis ball for her to chase, leaned against the chain link fence while scrolling through his phone, and made a bit of small talk with a couple of other dog owners from a reasonable distance.

Nothing that could be misconstrued as flirting.

Instead of questionable photos to mail to Kaydel, Rey snapped a pic of Bebe (who she undoubtedly missed more than Poe) when the dog sniffed around the far side of the run, a few candid shots of Ben and a particularly bold and nosy squirrel that kept darting around their feet, as if determined to find some food they were hiding from him (spoiler: they weren't).
The rest of the day was uneventful. They returned to the Crait Suite Inn and, with both Poe and Kaydel gone, and the afternoon found Rey working on her mosaic while Ben quietly scribbled away in his notebook until it was time to meet Rose.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Rose was already waiting at the table. She caught Rey's attention and waved them over.

"Rose Tico," she said with a smile, standing up to introduce herself to Ben. Her trademark sunny smile didn't quite reach her dark eyes, which were looking him up and down critically.

"Ben Solo," he replied, shaking her outstretched hand. Rose, who could accurately be described as petite, looked even smaller next to Ben's hulking frame but Rey could tell that she wasn't intimidated by him in the slightest.

"And you!" Rose admonished. She pulled Rey into a fierce hug before she sat down, pulling out her phone.

"I have a Groupon for this place, but I'll have them put you on a separate full price ticket if I don't think you're good enough for my girl," she told Ben with a wink. Rey wasn't entirely sure she was joking.

Ben laughed nervously and sat down. He looked slightly surprised when Rey sat on the same side of the booth as him, pressing her leg up against his. Luckily, he recovered before Rose looked up and, getting into the act, draped his arm over her shoulder in a manner that wasn't too terribly stiff.

"Relax." Rey leaned into Ben's side, positioning her mouth close enough to his ear to disguise her whisper as a kiss. Her voice was more breath than sound. "She's not going to put you through a formal inquisition."

Ben nodded. On impulse, and before she pulled away, Rey did actually kiss his ear, drawing the lobe between her lips and giving it the slightest nibble. Ben drew in a stuttered breath.

It could only help to sell their story, right?

And OK, maybe a little part of her wanted to give those ears a bit of attention. She hadn't been lying when she said they gave him some distinction; he really shouldn't be embarrassed by them.

She smiled at his blush and sat back. Rose gave them a smirk as she glanced up from her phone.

"So, you're the one responsible for monopolizing all of Rey's time these days?" Rose was nothing if not blunt and to-the-point.

"Well, I wouldn't put it that way." Ben's voice betrayed his nerves.

Rey reached up to give the hand he had rested on her shoulder what she hoped was a comforting squeeze. He returned the gesture with a clench of his own that was nearly painful.

Maybe they should start with drinks. He needed to relax.

"Maybe I'm the one monopolizing his time," Rey said with a coy smile.

Rose laughed genuinely at that. "Fair enough. So Ben, since Rey has told me absolutely nothing about you -" she darted a quick glare at Rey, "-except to assure me you're totally not a serial killer, you'll have to start from the beginning. What do you do?"
"I'm a professor. Math, statistics to be specific. But I'm taking a few months off." Ben's grip remained tight; she rubbed her thumb along their joined hands.

"Really? Here in Coruscant? I'll be a senior this year at UC." Rose looked surprised. But then, although he had undone his hair, Ben was still wearing the clothes Rey had dressed him in. Aside from his rigid posture, he looked more like a laid-back student than a teacher.

"No, in Chandrila." He relaxed his hand a little under Rey's ministrations.

"What brought you here then?" Rose's eyes darted between him and the menu in her hand.

"Just...needed a break."

"What's with the third degree, Rose?" Rey asked. She leaned against Ben's side as if to position herself defensively between the two.

"What? I just want to make sure he's good enough for you." Rose smiled and shrugged. "How did you guys get together anyway?"

"Shared interests," Ben said with a wry smile. He met Rey's eyes with a knowing look and she smirked up at him.

Well, it wasn't a lie.

As Rey predicted, Ben did loosen up more after they ordered drinks. Of course, it helped that Rose had relented some in her questioning as well.

As his tension eased, he got into the charade with Rey, pulling her closer at appropriate moments in the conversation and pressing light kisses to the top of her head when she leaned into him.

Two pints later their entrees arrived and Ben removed his arm from Rey's shoulder so that she could move freely, but before Rey could question herself for feeling a quick pang of disappointment at the loss of contact, he rested his hand on her leg.

He's really getting into the act now, she thought as he played with the hem of her dress and traced patterns into the bare skin just above her knee. The light touch made her shiver.

Conversation flowed fairly naturally and, though Rey or Ben occasionally faltered when a topic came too close to exposing their true situation, one of them always recovered.

More than once, Rey found herself distracted by the game she and Ben were playing and blushed whenever Rose drew her attention back. It was far too easy to lose herself when Ben's dark eyes were focused on her. Worse yet, even though she knew this was just a facade, she realized she wasn't looking forward to the end of it.

"You two aren't going to be the sickening couple that feeds each other, are you?" Rose asked when Rey helped herself to a fry from Ben's plate.

Ben's ears reddened and Rey knew he was thinking of their conversation the last time they went out.

"Why? Are you jealous?" Rey smirked and proceeded to do just that. She tried to suppress her shiver when Ben's lips grazed her fingers. She stuck out her tongue at Rose. "Get you your own handsome giant and leave me to mine."

Rey turned her playful grin from Rose back to Ben and her breath caught in her throat. He was
watching her with that intense gaze of his and didn't seem to be paying any attention to the banter between herself and Rose any longer. His eyes dropped to the fingers that had just fed him and then to her smirking mouth before locking onto Rey's eyes again. She didn't look away.

*If this were real, we'd kiss right now.*

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Ben ducked his head to Rey's and kissed her softly. His plush lips were warm, and softer than she had expected. Not that she'd wondered or anything.

He pulled back just a fraction of an inch, his eyes silently asking her for permission. In response, Rey closed the minute gap, kissing him firmly and daring to drag the tip of her tongue lightly across Ben's lips. He met her fervor with his own, parting his lips at her unspoken request. His hand on her leg tightened and Rey inhaled sharply. She reached up, tangling her fingers into that *stupidly* soft hair as she deepened the kiss, and Ben made a low, vibrating sound that could very nearly be categorized as a *purr.* She smiled against Ben's lips, unreasonably proud of the reaction she was able to elicit in him.

"I'm still here, you know."

Rose's voice startled Rey more than she expected and, given the way he jumped, Ben as well. Far too reluctantly, she pulled away, watching Ben's Adam apple bob as he swallowed heavily.

"Sorry," they both muttered together. Rey was relieved that Ben hadn't removed his hand, then wanted to kick herself for feeling relieved.

"Sure you are," Rose said. She looked equal parts amused and contemplative.

Rey blushed and looked down as if suddenly very engrossed in the pasta in front of her. She licked her lips and could taste the lingering hint of salt from the fries Ben had been eating. Belatedly, she was very glad neither of them had ordered anything garlic-heavy.

She made an attempt to pay more attention on Rose for the remainder of the dinner, though she couldn't help glancing at Ben frequently, looking for an opportunity to reenact the moment. All in the name of their performance, of course. (As it happened, she had cause to initiate two more kisses before the bill came.)

When they all stood up to leave, Rose grabbed Rey by the arm. "Can I borrow my friend for a moment?" Without waiting for a reply, she began to tug her aside.

"Oh. Sure. I'll...wait here." Ben wandered over towards the door, awkwardly jamming his hands in his pockets.

"Be careful," Rose admonished, once she and Rey were out of Ben's earshot.

"What?" Rey almost laughed. "Don't tell me you still think he's a murderer or something."

"No. It's just... This isn't what I expected," Rose said.

"What do you mean?" Rey asked, casting a quick glance at Ben. He met her eyes and she gave him a reassuring smile.

Rose followed Rey's gaze then glanced back to her face. "I'm not sure exactly. But this... thing with you two."

Rey felt her cheeks warm. *Had they not been convincing enough?* She recalled Ben's hand, warm
against her skin, his contented hum when she'd brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. And then the kissing.

_The kissing..._

_She certainly thought they'd been convincing._

"Again, I don't know what you mean," was all she said to Rose, however.

"You met some guy and then basically vanished off the face of the planet. I thought you were getting over Poe with some fling. Sowing your wild oats or whatever. I figured you deserved that, even needed it maybe," Rose paused and tilted her head. "But this doesn't read like a rebound fling. It's more intense than that. I don't know what to make of it - I just don't want to see you get in too deep and get hurt again."

Rey suppressed a grin. _Ohh. Maybe they'd been too convincing, then._

"Ben won't hurt me." She couldn't tell Rose the whole truth, but she could at least say this with certainty. She really did trust Ben, even if the relationship wasn't what Rose thought it was.

"I'm sorry to worry you though. I'll try not to disappear again."

Rey gave Rose a tight hug. She'd been so focused on getting revenge, she _had_ unintentionally ignored her friend and hadn't realized Rose would mind her absence as much as she clearly did. Rey internally vowed to be a better friend from here on out.

Rey took Ben’s hand when she and Rose approached the exit. It seemed she had two people on her side now. They began the short walk home as Rose headed to her car.

“Are you going to give me back my hand?” Ben asked, when Rose had driven away.

“Die with the con, Ben. Die with the con.” Rey replied with a grin, swinging their joined hands between them.

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Look at the pretty moodboard @reylocalcalligraphy made for me for this fic! Thank you so much! <3
"I won't take so long to update," she said.

"It'll only be a week," she said.

Oops, sorry. Hope it was worth the wait. So, their first kiss, huh? And it was supposed to be an act...but we know better, right? ;)

(And, why yes, I DID shamelessly steal that final exchange - the die with the con bit - from iZombie, lol. Couldn't resist.)

**Edited May 2019 - Thank you to @colliderofhadron, best beta around!**
Tell Me What I'm Supposed To Do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Feels like we're making a mess

Hell on wheels in a black dress

You drove me to the fire

And left me there to burn"

~*~*~

"Does Bebe need a bath?"

Kaydel leaned closer to the dog and sniffed her fur.

Poe frowned. "It's not her,” he mumbled, screwing up his nose in distaste. “She went to the groomers last week. She hasn't rolled in anything as far as I know."

"I wondered if it was the garbage, but I've emptied everything." Kaydel’s voice was high pitched with frustration.

Poe walked through the loft slowly and purposeful. "I had maintenance up here earlier. They checked the toilets - nothing. Said no other residents have had any complaints, no recent back-ups."

Kaydel opened the fridge, sniffing for bad food. Poe peeked under the couch and behind the cushions while Bebe darted excitedly around the room, eager to join the game her humans were playing.

"Where is the fish?" Ben asked.

The trout Rey had hidden would have thawed and started to rot nicely, and they had enjoyed watching the initial confusion flit across Poe and Kaydel’s faces when they caught the first subtle whiffs then dismissed it as nothing. But, now, it had clearly moved beyond the “I must be imagining things” stage.

"It's in one of the air conditioning vents," Rey grinned. "Not a place they're likely to search. And it blows the stench right into the living area."

Ben figured it would also slow, but not prevent, the breakdown of the flesh so it would be a long-lasting odor. It would drive them mad. "Perfect," he smirked, glad to have something else to focus his mind on.

Walking home last night with Rey, hand in hand like a courting couple, had felt entirely too comfortable, which of course was, in itself, uncomfortable. They had said their goodbyes to Rose, who had happily driven away duped and blissfully unaware of their true activities. Meanwhile, the
further Rey and Ben got from the restaurant, the more Ben dwelled on their apparent performance.

It hadn’t taken long to get into character. It hadn’t helped that his mind kept supplying unsolicited observations.

Like how neatly Rey had fit, tucked against his side. She was smaller than him *(who wasn’t?)* but a fair amount taller than Kaydel and, not that Ben would ever begrudge his long-time girlfriend her genetics, his traitorous mind had considered the fact that he and Rey fit together rather more proportionately. Her head was at just the right height to tuck under his chin and putting an arm around her was simple; it was easy to lean over *just a bit* to kiss her.

It was *far* too easy to kiss her.

And not just because of her proximity. It wasn’t as if they *needed* to play up the PDA angle to that extent to sell their story, but he hadn’t paused to question the impulse. Instead, he just *acted* on it, capturing her lips with his own.

Only afterward did he wonder if he had got carried away, belatedly blaming the urge on getting caught up in the game.

It felt too much like cheating, which was absurd. How many actors of stage and screen performed each day, selling the illusion of a happy relationship? This was no different, was it? And if his heart rate increased, well that was simply a natural physiological response, right? It meant nothing.

And anyway, a quiet voice rising above the chaos of his mind provided, Kaydel had left *him* - he didn’t owe her *any* lingering promise of fidelity. He quickly tried to steer from that thought and the path that stemmed from it.

Rey, for her part, had played right along and didn’t appear at all bothered by the liberties he had taken, nor did she seem as conflicted or distressed by the evening as he did. She fell back into the easy camaraderie that had developed between them over the past few weeks, and merrily chatted about new ideas for messing with Poe as she kicked off her shoes and plopped down onto the sofa.

Determined to follow Rey’s lead and behave as if nothing had happened *(because nothing had happened, of course)*, Ben tried to shove the sensation of Rey’s fingertips against his lips, the taste of her mouth against his, from his mind. He draped his arm on the back of the couch, trying hard to ignore the impulse to play with her hair.

*ding*

Ben looked at his phone with a sigh.

**New Message from Mother Cell: Ben Solo call me ASAP**

This was *not* the type of distraction he wanted right now and he guiltily swiped away the notification. The calls and texts were getting more frequent, and therefore harder to ignore.

In fairness, Leia had given him space, however frustrated she’d been when he’d announced this unplanned *sabbatical*, muttering something about the tardy appearance of the latent Solo drive to run. He suspected she was to thank for his department head’s easy acceptance of his absence as well. *(One might call the permissive response to his hasty and erratic behavior *nepotism* even, but Ben chose not to dwell on that too long.)*

Yet as July began to slip away and August – and a new semester – neared, it made sense that they would be reaching out to him. Not only had he ignored several calls from the head of his department,
Dr. Phasma, as well as texts from his colleague, Hux, but his mother had recently moved beyond sending emails from her account at the university and begun calling and texting his personal number. She really wanted to reach him.

When Ben had fled Chandrila, he had only intended to take the summer off. His associates, boss and mother likely expected him back in the classroom for the fall.

He himself had planned on going back much sooner, with Kaydel in tow. But she was still happily playing house in Poe's (albeit stinky) loft while he and Rey were on the outside looking in.

Ben wasn't sure what was to come or when he'd be back, so he simply continued his current method of avoidance and ignored the message. He'd figure it out later.

Tucking the device into his pocket, Ben turned back to Rey with a smile. "So, what's your guess – is this going to attract mice or just ants?"

"Ants, definitely. I don't think mice are carnivores."

Over the next few days, Ben grew used to waking up to two things.

One was the vibration of his phone (he'd switched off the sound) alerting him to a missed call or text from Dr. Phasma, Leia or even Luke, since his mother had recently enlisted his help in hounding Ben.

The other was more pleasant, if more confusing. Rey was, it appeared, a cuddler and Ben had discovered he might be as well.

The bed wasn't huge but it was decently sized. There was room enough for them to lie apart, and that was how the nights typically began. But by morning, they always seemed to close the distance between them and Ben would wake up to the pleasant sensation of warm and soft and girl pressed up against him. It was a foreign, though not disagreeable, experience (Kaydel was never much for cuddling – she claimed that Ben ran too hot). In the hazy moments before he was fully conscious, Ben found himself tugging Rey closer and inhaling her scent, before reminding himself that it wasn't Kaydel in his arms; he would then cautiously disentangle himself from her.

Today, his phone was more insistent than other days and Ben sighed heavily into Rey's hair, keeping his eyes closed as he tried to ignore the reality of the day in every way.

"Hey, Ben," Rey croaked as she shifted in his arms and, in embarrassment, Ben cleared his throat and let go of her.

"Oh. Sorry."

"I didn't mean –" Rey stopped and shook her head before beginning again. "Don't worry about it," she said softly. She sat up and nodded towards the projection on the wall. "I was just going to show you that."

It was fairly early but there was a lot of commotion over at the loft. Kaydel was holding Bebe, who looked very frustrated at being contained, while Poe directed two uniformed men moving furniture from the carpeted portion of the living area to the hardwood. The backs of their shirts were
emblazoned with a smiling scrub brush and the company name, “Steam Fresh - Carpet and Upholstery Cleaning.”

Ben and Rey exchanged a glance and snickered. Poe could replace every inch of fabric in the loft and still not get rid of the stench.

“If only we’d already planted the lingerie or the phone,” Rey said wistfully. “Imagine them finding that with an audience.”

Ben gave her a wry smile. “Talk about awkward. Kaydel trying to decide whether to confront him while the carpet cleaners are there, or stewing over it until they leave? Poe being utterly bewildered?”

Over on the nightstand, Ben’s phone vibrated again.

“That thing’s been going off nonstop. Someone really wants to get ahold of you,” Rey said, following his gaze as he glared at the offensive object.

“It’s work. My family,” Ben sighed. “It’s my family about work, specifically.”

Rey looked as though she wanted to know more but refrained from asking, waiting instead to see if he would volunteer any other details.

Ben reluctantly unlocked his phone. Two missed calls from his mother, two texts from Hux and one from Uncle Luke.

The text from Luke simply said, “Please call.”

Hux was a bit wordier and Ben could practically hear the irritation just from glancing at the words on the screen. Hux explained that as their boss, Dr. Phasma, was unable to be quite so frank with Leia, she had been directing her annoyance at Ben’s continued absence towards him instead. “As if I have any sway over you. Not sure if she expects me to drag you back to your office like fetching a wayward dog. Of course, if you stay gone, that’s one more obstacle out of my way when a promotion opens up,” he had continued.

Armitage Hux passed for the closest thing Ben had to a friend outside of family and Kaydel (and now, Rey). They had both worked for Mayor Snoke during high school and the sense of survival that came as a result of having escaped his grasp had forged a tense sort of bond between them, though the competitive flame that the man had stoked between never quite disappeared. They had placed bets on who would be first to become tenured and who would succeed Dr. Phasma as department head after her eventual retirement, though that would be years away yet.

“A new semester starts next month. They’d probably rather the course catalog list my name rather than TBA under ‘Instructor’ sooner rather than later,” Ben said with a shrug.

“Oh. You’re going back then?” Rey asked.

“I can’t yet, can I?” Ben nodded toward the image of the loft. “We’re not done yet.”

“So, when?”

“I can’t promise to be back by early August to prepare. I guess,” he inhaled and squared his shoulders, “I guess I’m taking the fall semester off too.”

“They’ll let you do that? You can afford that?”
“I have my savings. As for the rest…being the son of the university president helps. But I think I should probably go break the news in person. My department head will not be happy.”

Rey looked thoughtful for a moment. “Do you want a ride?”

“What?”

“Rather than take a bus or train. I could give you a ride,” she smiled. “Just buy me lunch and help with gas. I wouldn’t mind a change in scenery.”

Ben pictured it – the open road, the wind in their hair while holding tightly to Rey on the back of her motorcycle for the entirety of the hours-long journey. It was an oddly appealing thought. Of course, there wouldn’t be wind in their hair – they’d have helmets on – and his butt would probably be sore after that long on a bike, he thought, bringing himself back to reality. But still.

“Sure. If you really don’t mind,” he finally said.

“I really don’t.”

“Are you sure we can leave these two unsupervised?” Ben joked, gesturing once again towards Poe and Kaydel.

Rey smirked “We’ll let them have a bit of a break. Then we’ll really hit ‘em with all we’ve got when we come back.”

“We could make a pit stop on the way back,” Ben mused. “We haven’t used Poe’s card for the ‘shady motel’ portion of the plan yet. What do you bet we can find a suitably sleazy place right off the highway?”

After the words left his mouth, Ben flushed, realizing the suggestion could be easily misread. But Rey didn’t seem fazed.

“Now you’re talking,” she replied with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

Watching carpets and sofas being cleaned could only capture one’s attention for so long (as in, not very long at all) so Ben and Rey didn’t waste any time getting ready and heading out. Within an hour, they were showered and dressed and speeding towards the city limits on Rey’s bike.

As Ben predicted, the seat wasn’t very comfortable for a long trip, and it didn’t take long for his hair to grow sweaty and plastered to his head under the helmet in the summer sun. But, he mused, a seat on a Greyhound wasn’t exactly luxury either and he far preferred the roar of the wind rushing past them and the feel of Rey’s waist under his hands to the crowds and noise of being on a bus.

By midday, they reached the outskirts of Chandrila, and from there it was only fifteen minutes to the school. Ben wasn’t one hundred percent sure who might be on campus right now – the summer schedule wasn’t as full as spring and fall, and staffing reflected as much – but he was hoping to meet with Phasma and avoid a face-to-face with his mother. He owed it to his department head to discuss the coming semester in person, especially as he had left the resolution so late, but would rather not face Leia’s direct scrutiny, nor the pity in her eyes. He hadn’t told his family, in so many words, that he was chasing after Kaydel and hoping to bring her back, but it couldn’t have been hard for her to
Hux was in his office when Ben headed towards Phasma’s and the redhead flagged him down as he walked by the open doorway.

“So, the prodigal son returns,” Hux said with a smirk, reclining slightly in his chair.

“Not exactly,” Ben said. “I was actually on my way to speak with Phasma about taking the fall semester off as well.”

“Really? She is not going to be pleased. Dopheld took your summer classes and it has not gone smoothly.”

“Mitaka is an intelligent man. He’s perfectly capable of taking over my courses.” Dopheld Mitaka had been working as an assistant instructor and a tutor in the math department for the past year and a half.

Hux chuckled. “His intelligence is not in question. He’s got a brilliant mind and could probably happily dedicate his life to research and study. He is…less capable of keeping a classroom in line – especially some of the lazy brats that expect all summer courses to be a cakewalk.”

“Well,” Ben said honestly, “No time like the present to learn. He can’t have taken a job usually held by grad students and not planned or expected to move on from that in time.”

“I suppose your own first year was a little rough too, looking back.” Hux narrowed his eyes slightly. He was baiting Ben, but he didn’t bite. There was no true malice in his comment – their conversations often had this edge – but Ben didn’t have time to spar with him.

“Is Dr. Phasma in her office?” Ben asked instead, changing the subject.

“She was in today. I haven’t seen her leave, but naturally, she doesn’t run her schedule by me for approval.” Hux sat up straighter. “She really is quite pissed you know. And she can’t exactly complain very easily without stepping on toes, which only adds to her irritation.”

“I’ll be back soon enough.” Maybe. “I’ll try to get her off your case though. That’s part of why I came to speak with her in person. I know I left a little…unprofessionally…before.”

“What on earth could be that thrilling in Coruscant anyway? Connix is clearly done with you.” Hux wasn’t ribbing him with that, just being particularly blunt. *Ben really had been transparent when he left, hadn’t he?*

“Or does it have anything to do with the girl you arrived here with?” he continued, nodding towards his window facing the parking lot with a knowing glint in his eyes. “Are you letting yourself get distracted?”

It had *everything* to do with Rey, though not in the manner that Hux was suggesting.

With some measure of guilt, Ben thought of how it had felt to kiss her, to wake up holding her.

Well, it was *mostly* nothing like that, anyway.

Ben wasn’t about to explain himself, however. “That’s Rey. We’ve been working on a…project together.”

“Ah, and what is this project? Phasma will be delighted to hear you’ve been doing something
During your little sabbatical.” Hux’s tone said that he wasn’t convinced in the slightest.

Ignoring the comment, Ben finally excused himself and continued down the hall towards Phasma’s office.

Predictably, the thin smile Dr. Gwen Phasma wore when Ben first entered her office grew into a taut, straight line as he explained he wasn’t here to return to his duties, but rather to make arrangements for more time off. Her words remained polite but there was certainly an undercurrent of hostility when she vowed that Ben’s irresponsibility would only be tolerated for so long because, despite his familial connections to the school, she still had a department to run.

To placate her, Ben offered to stop by Mitaka’s office on his way out and give the young, new instructor his personal number and the offer to be available if he wanted to call or email with any questions. It wasn’t much, but the idea that Dopheld might direct some of his concerns towards Ben instead of Phasma soothed her somewhat.

Ben popped into his own office, musty from being closed up and unused for the past couple months, but otherwise unchanged. He grabbed a few folders and a flash drive, both containing lessons plans, tests, syllabi, and other resources for the courses he regularly taught and brought them down to Mitaka’s office. He tried to avoid the deer-in-the-headlights look in the man’s eyes as he explained he’d be gone a while longer and Dopheld would be getting the opportunity to teach more classes.

Hopefully the files Ben passed to him would be of some use, but he knew from his own experience it would just take a bit of time to get into the swing of things – even though most professors and instructors had been T.A.s at some point, teaching a class on your own was a whole different animal. By December, Mitaka would either come fully into his own or decide this wasn’t the career path for him.

The string of conversations took a bit longer than Ben had initially anticipated and, once he parted from Mitaka, he hurried towards the parking lot, feeling guilty for leaving Rey for so long. There was a shady lawn with benches adjacent to the lot where Rey could eat the tacos they’d picked up from a drive-thru just off campus, but he still felt rude for making her wait alone.

As he exited the building, however, he discovered she wasn’t alone.

Ben had made it through the halls of the math building and his meetings without crossing paths with either his mother or his uncle, not a tremendous feat since they were both more likely to be found in the administrative building, but Ben still had felt a sense of relief.

He should have known that his luck wouldn’t hold out.

Rey had indeed perched herself on a bench under a crab apple tree heavy with fruit. Flowering bushes nearby had attracted a host of butterflies and Rey looked at home, surrounded by green and life and nature, instead of the harsh steel and cement that made up so much of the city. The scene might even be called picturesque, if not for the presence of his mother on the bench beside her, chatting away.

Ben wasn’t prepared for this collision of two worlds. It was one thing to ignore Hux’s little jabs (even if Ben had been somewhat affronted that Hux might have implied anything untoward about Rey). His mother’s watchful eye would be harder to mislead.

Maybe he could step back inside hide until Leia inevitably need to leave to tend to some obligation or another.
No such luck. Of course.

As if she could sense his presence (but, unhelpfully, not his panic) Rey looked in Ben’s direction.

“Ben! There you are,” she called out, waving him over.

His mother, too, turned and smiled. Her eyes were slightly guarded, but her face didn’t display any of the irritation that her terse text messages had contained. Ever performing for the public, Ben knew she would save that for later. If she hadn’t been born into the academic world, she’d have made a wonderful politician.

Without an alternative option, Ben had no choice but to walk towards the two women. “Mother. Rey.” He gave a short nod of greeting to each of them. It occurred to him that he didn’t know what story Rey had given to Leia, what role they were to play. He prayed she would give him a hint before he made the wrong move.

“I was on my back from lunch when I saw you two arrive and I headed over,” Leia explained. “It was like a vision from the past, seeing you on a motorcycle. You looked just like your father for a moment. Gave me a little shock.”

Ben merely nodded. Much to his mother’s dismay, young Ben Solo had loved it when his father used to take him for joyrides on his fastest, most dangerous vehicles – dirt bikes and motorcycles, hot rods and race cars. As he’d grown older and Han was absent for longer and longer stretches of time, the memory had become bittersweet.

Before Rey, he hadn’t been near a motorcycle in years. In fact, he didn’t even own a car, preferring to walk or bike unless the weather prohibited it. Han had craved the open road and the means to traverse it; the map of Ben’s world had been rather small until very recently.

“So, uh, you’ve clearly met Rey then.” Ben cringed inwardly as soon as the words were out of his mouth. But he wasn’t sure how else to say ‘I don’t know what game I’m supposed to be playing.’

Rey met his eyes then, realizing what he was looking for. She patted the bench right next to her and when he sat down, she reached for his hand, twining their fingers together and resting their joined hands on his thigh.

Oh. So that was the angle she decided to go with. Instinctually, Ben rubbed circles against Rey’s hand with his thumb, unsure whether he was nervous or relieved that she chose to employ this ruse.

“Yes, she introduced herself and I’m not going to let you live that down, Benjamin Solo. You didn’t tell me one word about this new lovely lady in your life,” Leia chastised.

Ben opened his mouth to apologize, but Rey beat him to it. “It’s okay really, Mrs. Organa. Like I said, it’s all very recent. I’m sure he would have gotten round to it eventually.”

Ben’s mother fixed her eyes on him. He could practically see the wheels turning in her head, trying to piece together what she knew about his departure from Chandrila and subsequent radio silence, and reconcile it with this visit and the unexpected addition of Rey.

“It’s a mother’s prerogative, my dear,” she said, turning her gaze back to Rey. “And as I said, please call me Leia.”

“Sorry, mother,” Ben said dutifully. “I’ve meant to be in touch, but it’s just been busy.”

Leia raised her eyebrows at that. A week’s worth of unanswered text messages that said otherwise
hung in the air between them.

“You haven’t been at work in two months,” Leia reminded him. “So that’s not occupying your time.”

Ben’s grip tightened on Rey’s hand. It was always harder to lie to his mother. “We’ve just been busy, that’s all,” He repeated. He didn’t have a better excuse in mind.

“Busy enough that you need to take off an extra semester?”

Rey blushed slightly at Leia’s tone and how it implicated just what might be keeping them too busy to call or text. “He’s been helping me with some of those art projects I was telling you about,” she blurted out.

Leia just chuckled and patted Rey’s shoulder. “Believe it or not, I was young once too, you know.”

“Mother,” Ben muttered, somewhere between a sigh and a plea. He didn’t want this conversation to continue. He didn’t think she’d bring up grandchildren (as she had more than once to Kaydel) since this supposed ‘relationship’ was so much more recent, but he couldn’t guarantee it. “We actually need to be leaving now.”

“You can’t at least stay for dinner? Show Rey around a bit and come by the house in a few hours when I’m off?”

“We have plans.” It wasn’t untrue, and Rey nodded along to Ben’s statement. Plans to book a motel room solely for the sake of it showing up on a credit card bill, but plans nonetheless.

“We’ll come back some other time,” Rey promised. She looked the slightest bit guilty about lying to Leia. She and Ben stood up and Leia followed suit.

“I’ll hold you to that.” Leia gave Rey a hug, and then Ben. When she released him, she gave him a piercing look that Rey didn’t catch. Ben knew that he couldn’t go completely silent again on his mother or there would be hell to pay.

Ben and Rey walked over to Rey’s bike as Leia headed in the opposite direction towards another building on campus. Collectively, they sighed.

“That was interesting,” Rey said, looking up at Ben. “Your mother is really nice, but a little intimidating. I felt like she could see right through my lies.”

“She has that effect on people,” Ben replied. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mother pause in the doorway of the administrative building. He kissed Rey’s forehead and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Just in case Leia was looking back, of course. “That’s why I was hoping to avoid her.”

Rey chanced a glance in Leia’s direction as she picked up her helmet. “Do you think she knows?”

“That we’re stalking and harassing our exes? No. But she does think we’re hiding something, I think.”

“I shouldn’t have said we were dating. She knows about Kaydel. It’s too soon for that,” Rey worried. She turned her helmet over in her hands a few times. “But she was here and asked me where you went and who I was and I couldn’t think of something else since clearly, I couldn’t say we worked together or anything. Was that alright?”
“Of course, don’t worry. She bought that. I just think *she* thinks there’s something *more.*” Ben rubbed Rey’s shoulders, imploring her to relax. “Anyway, I didn’t mind. It’s fine.”

“Right,” Rey nodded as if to convince herself.

Ben thought her cheeks still looked a little pink but then she was sliding the helmet on and her face was covered before he could ponder if she was really blushing and why. He tugged on his own helmet and mounted the motorcycle behind Rey, eager to get away from the university.

Chapter End Notes

"Denial" is spelled B-E-N-S-O-L-O. But he's making progress. :)

I realize this chapter probably wasn't as fun as the last, but it was important. And hey, some unexpected 'meet the parents' there, right? These two keep stumbling into little relationship-y things without meaning to. :)

And again I took awhile to deliver, I know. Sorry. :(

If you have a tumblr, come talk to me! I love talking to people, even if I'm not the best at striking up a conversation. :) I'm @orkindofamazing

**Edit: May 2019 - Thank you @colliderofhadron for your wonderful beta'ing help!**
Alone

Chapter Notes

Please note that I have added a few tags. This chapter deals with some heavier themes as Rey opens up to Ben about her past. There is a discussion of a past attempted sexual assault that Rey suffered. It's not an explicit description, but the subject matter may be triggering. There is also discussion of Rey's abandonment by her parents and their substance abuse and alcoholism.

If you would like to read this chapter but skip this part, stop reading at "Coruscant is the last place my parents were known to be.” If you are comfortable reading about Rey's parents but not the assault, stop at "I was seventeen when I came here." You can resume at "They lay in silence for a few moments,"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“I always got by on my own

I never really cared until I met you

And now it chills me to the bone”

~*~*~

Rey was grateful for the relative peace and quiet riding brought her. Motorcycles didn’t lend themselves well to ongoing conversation. Not that she usually had a passenger anyway. But she needed a breather after her conversation with Ben’s mom. It had been unnerving – answering her questions, unsure whether she was saying the right thing. Rey took back every teasing jab she’d directed towards Ben for being nervous around Rose; now that she had been the outsider, she completely understood his apprehension.

The drive didn’t last too long (Ben directed her to an apartment building only minutes away from the campus) but it was enough to clear her head. Rey was at ease once more as she and Ben hopped off the bike and headed up the stairs. Since they were in town anyway, Ben wanted to stop by his place to pick up a few things before heading back to Coruscant.

Rey was curious, if she was honest with herself, to peak into Ben’s world... who he was when he wasn’t skulking around spying on his ex-girlfriend. His apartment didn’t reveal much though. It was nice – he could clearly afford something much better than the Crait Suite Inn, but then that residence was chosen for location, not atmosphere or amenities. However, it was lacking. It was as if a page from a magazine had been brought to life – smooth, hardwood floors, stainless steel *everywhere*, and modern furnishings.

But nothing of Ben. She had expected shelves full of his notebooks and books, to see his sketches and drawings on the backside of take-out menus, pictures of him and Kaydel across the walls, and knickknacks cluttered on the end table.
It was cold, like a body without a soul. The mustiness and a fine layer of dust – the result of it being closed up for the last couple of months – added to the effect, but it didn’t feel as if someone had ever really lived here.

In a way, it reminded Rey of various foster homes she’d lived in – stock bedrooms that were barely hers, and only temporarily at that. Sometimes a family would make an effort. Present her with a room that had been freshly painted and decorated with posters and figurines that some sales associate at the local Target had told them ‘girls were into these days’, rather than show her to a dismal room recently vacated by another kid from the system. But neither the gloomy nor the cheery dwellings had ever been her own.

Poe’s home had never been hers, either. Just because she was no longer being shuttled around the foster care system, it didn’t necessarily mean she’d stopped subconsciously trying to fit into other people’s ready-made lives. But Poe’s place had obviously been his, and anyone who walked in could get a sense of who he was. Not like Ben’s.

“Kaydel took a lot of stuff when she left, huh?” Rey hedged. She could only assume that Kaydel had provided the type of things that made a house a home and that those personal effects had gone with her when she said goodbye.

“Huh?” Ben looked over, confused. He opened a desk drawer and Rey caught sight of pocket notebooks, similar to the ones she frequently saw him using. At least there were some of those, anyway. “Oh. No, Kaydel never lived here. She has her own place. Or had? I don’t know if she’s ended the lease or not.”

“Really?” Rey was genuinely surprised. They’d been together for over a decade, hadn’t they? “I just assumed…”

Ben unearthed a large black notebook from the bottom of the drawer, and tucked it into a messenger bag with his laptop.

“We each got our own places in college,” he explained. “We decided we were too young to move in together then. I had a plan. We would get settled in our careers, then we were supposed to get married once we reached thirty and we would buy a house together then.” He paused a moment. “Will. I meant we will buy a house.”

“Oh,” was all Rey said. Ben sounded as though he were reading tasks from a checklist. He had a plan, not a dream. Rey was predisposed to resent Kaydel – it took two to tango and Kaydel had been Poe’s dance partner, so to speak – but she felt a brief, unexpected pang of pity for her, listening to Ben’s dispassionate itinerary.

She followed him to the kitchen and watched as he rummaged and gathered items. Now, here, was something of Ben Solo. He still kept everything tucked away in cupboards as if he was afraid to really occupy the space around him – but said cupboards were filled with all manner of cooking tools and ingredients. This was where he came alive, Rey could see.

“Our spice rack is a bit lacking, don’t you think? We could do with more variety,” Ben said, checking that lids were closed tightly before dropping several jars into his open bag.

Rey shrugged and smiled. “Well, you would know better than me.”

“No room for any of my pans though,” he continued in a (mostly…she thought) fake mournful tone. “What I have here is better than what we picked up at that discount store.”
Rey laughed at that. “You’ve managed so far. I think we’ll get by.”

When they shut off the lights and locked up, Rey didn’t feel like they were leaving much behind.

It had probably been a nice enough motel, once.

One could imagine that the chipped stucco was once a vibrant blue rather than the muddled grey it had faded to, that the lawn had been well-kept, soft and green, instead of the packed dirt and patches of weeds there was now. Rey parked her bike right outside the front entrance to their room – she almost wanted to wheel it right inside. Fifty or sixty years ago, happy families probably pulled up in their station wagons for a night of rest as they ventured cross-country on road trips. Those days were long since gone. Now, the “Y” in *Mos Eisley Motor Lodge* was cracked, and two of the other letters flickered only sporadically, the neon fighting to limp along, while a sign outside the lobby boasted that hourly rates were available.

Chandrila was as pretty a town as Rey had been in (though, to be fair, most of her life was spent in Jakku and that wasn’t hard to beat) but even a postcard-worthy place like this still had its seedy underbelly. The motel was on the far edge of town, a district that had been left behind as the city grew north and west.

Ben slipped the key card in the slot and opened the door, holding it for Rey to follow him. Their room-turned-makeshift-home at Crait Suite was neglected and run-down, but nowhere near as unpleasant as this. Whoever operated Crait Suite Inn had tried to transform the small rooms – even if the furniture was cheap and tacky. The proprietor of this place certainly made no false promises about it was. Two tired looking beds, a tv bolted to the dresser and, despite the claims that all rooms had been converted to non-smoking in compliance with city ordinances, the faded carpets, and even the very walls, were permeated with the odor from decades gone by.

“If only the credit card bill came with pictures. So Poe could really appreciate what we’re going through for him,” Rey joked.

“And a scratch and sniff sticker,” Ben added with a wry smile. “I’ll take the bed closer to the door. Just in case the lock is shoddy at all.”

“I took care of myself long before you were ever around,” Rey said, “But I appreciate the sentiment.”

In truth, she wasn’t looking forward to sleeping in *either* bed, and it had nothing to do with the trustworthiness of the lock, but she perched on the edge of one bed nonetheless. Darkness had fallen by the time she and Ben had headed to the motel and the day, even if enjoyable, had left her tired enough to sleep wherever.

They had spent the remainder of the afternoon cruising around Chandrila – Ben pointing out some of his favorite haunts, and even visiting the old magnolia tree his great-grandfather had planted for his wife, located outside of the Skywalker family home – and his mother’s residence – so *that* little jaunt only took place after circling past the university again to make sure her car was still on campus. Once they checked-in to their room, Rey was glad they had put off their arrival until the last minute.

“It’s a good thing it’s summer.” Rey pointedly left her shoes on and laid down on top of the comforter, rather than under.
Ben nodded as he followed suit on his own bed. Once the lights were out, however, the sleep that Rey longed for eluded her. She tossed and turned on the stiff mattress, trying to get comfortable. Finally, Rey rolled onto her side, facing Ben’s bed. Her own felt strangely big and empty after sharing him in recent days.

“I can’t get to sleep.” She said the words quietly, in case he had managed to doze off, so as not to wake him.

“Me either.” Ben shifted until he too was laying on his side, facing Rey. A stream of moonlight crept in through a gap in the curtains and illuminated his pale face and dark eyes.

“We should have booked the room then crashed at your apartment,” Rey said, kicking herself for not thinking of it sooner. “It would have been the same charge on the bill.”

Ben groaned. “I didn’t think of that. We still can head back over there if you want?”

“Have you ever driven a motorcycle?” When Ben shook his head in the negative, Rey sighed. “Then let’s not bother now. It’s late. I don’t feel like driving even another mile. We’ll be fine.” Anyway, it wasn’t like she hadn’t slept in worse environments before. Though Ben might not be used to it.

“Whatever you prefer,” Ben said.

They lay in silence for a few more moments, before Ben asked if Rey wanted him to boot up his laptop and open Netflix.

“Nah, I’ll fall asleep soon enough,” she said. Then after a moment, she spoke again. “It really is pretty here.”

Ben choked on a laugh. “Here?”

“Shut up. Not Here, here. You know what I mean. Here, Chandrila,” Rey said. “Even the downtown streets are full of trees. It’s like it isn’t real – just some Norman Rockwell painting of a town. It’s a lot more…I don’t know…welcoming, than the city is.”

There was a reason places like Coruscant were called concrete jungles, where patches of nature were relegated to parks framed on every side by cement and steel and existed only as efficiently used spaces, rather than permitted to ebb and flow throughout the city.

“I’d always taken it for granted until I followed Kay. I’d been there before, but visits are different from living there. I never really appreciated that.” Ben looked thoughtful. “If you don’t like it though, what’s keeping you? Is it worth it just to torture Poe?”

Rey stared at Ben across the gap between their beds. She could laugh and say of course and leave it at that, and she knew he wouldn’t press for more.

Or she could be honest. It was becoming increasingly difficult to conceal her past from the man with whom she’d been sharing such a personal campaign of vengeance. And she knew enough about Ben now to trust him with her painful secret.

“First of all, yes, getting back at Poe is a good enough reason on its own. But,” Rey inhaled a shaky breath. Here we go, she thought, and it felt as though her lips were betraying her as she said, “No, that’s not all.”

She paused. Maybe for a moment, maybe for an hour. She wasn’t sure. The silence that hung in the room was heavier now, more expectant than it had been. But though Ben was watching Rey, he kept
still and waited patiently for her to continue when she was ready.

“Coruscant is the last place my parents were known to be.” Rey finally said, the words barely more than a whisper. She cleared her throat and gathered the strength to continue. She closed her eyes, hoping to keep the tears at bay but her body had already started to shake. “They left me when I was about seven years old. It was supposed to be temporary – they said I’d come home soon. I didn’t know it then, but they’d gotten in trouble – drug possession or intent to sell...I never did get all the details, but that’s how it originally began. I got to see them every six weeks at supervised visits, though. I counted the days until I’d get to go home for real.

“But…but after a few months, they stopped showing up. They didn’t ever try to bring me home. The last time I saw my parents was at court when they signed me over as a ward of the state. Once it was all official, they left town completely.” Tears had escaped Rey’s eyes despite attempts to blink them back. “I got one letter from my father, a few years later. He was in jail here in Coruscant.”

Something warm enveloped Rey’s hands. She opened her eyes and blinked, adjusting to the sight in front of her. She hadn’t heard Ben climb off of his bed and kneel next to hers but he was there suddenly, holding her hands, squeezing them, his thumbs gently running over the backs of her hand, offering heartfelt strength and comfort.

“Why didn’t they try?” she cried, still desperate to understand after all these years. “I try to tell myself that they were sick. But they didn’t even try to keep me. Why didn’t they want me?”

“I don’t know. I’m so sorry that I don’t know.” Ben rubbed at her clenched fists until they began to loosen. His words were soft but his voice was hard, angry.

“He died there,” Rey confessed, rolling on to her back and taking a few deep breaths to refocus herself. “Overdose. Though I didn’t find that out until I came out here later. I know I shouldn’t hate him for being weak, but I do.”

“You don’t need to feel guilty about that at all,” Ben growled out. He pulled himself up to the edge of Rey’s bed and she shuffled backward, making room and he lay down beside her, pulling her into his arms. “They were supposed to be there for you. They weren’t.”

The sense of safety she found in Ben’s arms eased some of her tension, but she felt a sudden flash of embarrassment as she realized just how violently she was shaking. She sighed heavily and debated whether she should just spit the whole story out, now that she’d gotten this far.

“I came here when I was seventeen. Ran away after…” Her voice faltered. Her lips felt strange – stiff, uncooperative. She couldn’t believe she was actually going to tell anyone this. She drew in a nervous breath and started again, her voice sounding as though it belonged to someone else. “I had this boyfriend. I snuck him into my room one night. Teedo, my foster father that is, was supposed to be working the overnight shift. He wasn’t. He’d been at a bar instead and when he came home, he… caught us.

“He chased my boyfriend out, yelling and screaming but then he tried…he came back to my room…” Rey’s voice had an unsteady edge as she repeated the words she could never forget. “He told me that if I was ‘going to be such a slut, I should at least be with a real man’.”

“Rey.” The one word that fell from Ben’s mouth carried an anguished combination of fear, pity and rage all at once, somehow. Dreading what she was going to say next, his arms tightened around her and the soothing motion of his hands stroking her back intensified, as if the action could somehow protect her from the pain.
“He tried to…” She stumbled over the words as her whole body tensed in Ben’s arms. They both lay in silence for a few moments as the dreadful memory flashed across her mind, before she continued in a voice that she hoped sounded normal. “Well, he was pretty drunk so I was able to hold him off. I grabbed the lamp – the nearest thing I could reach – and hit him over the head.

“I was scared that I’d killed him, and then I was scared because, if I had, I didn’t feel any guilt about it. But he was only knocked out. Still. I packed my stuff and started hitchhiking out of there in the middle of the night.”

She lay stiffly in the warmth of Ben’s arms, trying to breathe through the horrendous cocktail of emotions swirling sickeningly throughout her tense body.

“Death would have been too good for him.” Ben spat. “Did you report him?”

Rey shook her head. “I was afraid to. I was still officially in the system until I was eighteen and I couldn’t bear the thought of being brought back. I didn’t want to draw attention to myself. Anyway, I escaped with fewer scars than some kids. I was luckier than others,” she said sadly.

“Almost shouldn’t have to count for a victory,” Ben said. “I’m glad you got away from him. But you shouldn’t have had to fear any worse. No one should.”

They lay in silence for a few moments, both lost in their own thoughts. Eventually, Rey’s shaking subsided and her tension slowly eased, pacified by Ben’s continuous caress, and in spite of everything, a little spark of contentment flickered inside of Rey. She had kept her history bottled up for so long – she hadn’t told Rose, or Finn, or even Poe, afraid that they would look at her differently somehow. Ben had let her spill it all out without an ounce of pressure or judgment. She snuggled deeper into his chest, grateful.

“I never did see my parents again,” Rey said after a while. “I looked up my dad and found out he was dead like I said. My mother seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. I couldn’t find any further records for her – no more legal troubles. I went to the vital statistics office to see if she had died too, but there was nothing. As if she just stopped existing. I couldn’t leave though. It was like…if I gave up on finding her too, it would feel too much like admitting I really was alone in the world.”

“You’re not alone,” Ben said, without hesitation. “Not anymore.”

Rey pulled back and met his eyes. She thought of his barren apartment, of what he’d once told her of his lonely childhood. “Neither are you.”

She wasn’t sure which one of them closed their eyes first, but sleep finally found her, while she was wrapped safely in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Huge, huge thanks to @colliderofhadron for beta'ing this for me and being so willing to field my questions and help me handle this chapter right.

I know this chapter was heavier than previous ones, but we’ve reached a place where
Rey truly feels comfortable enough with Ben to pull back the facade she presents to most of the world, a really important step for her. I hope it came across well.

Let me know your thoughts, and find me on tumblr if you want to: @orkindofamazing
The Potential Of You And Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The potential of you and me.

Like a book elegantly bound but,

in a language that we can’t read.

Just yet.”

~*~*~

What a difference a day could make.

Ben woke first and, despite their unsavory motel room, an ambient peace infused the space. The room was still – no Poe and Kaydel starting their day emblazoned across the wall, no cheerful yips from Bebe, but it wasn’t silent either. There was still the sound of traffic rolling along the nearby highway and periodic chatter wafting from the parking lot, or through the thin walls of neighboring rooms, but the noise was muffled, distant.

He looked down at Rey, still curled against his chest, still sleeping soundly. His arms spasmed slightly with cramp as a result of holding the same position all night and, even without blankets, he felt warm and sweaty from the combination of body heat and the finicky air conditioning unit shutting off some time during the night. But his discomfort was overridden by a protective desire to keep Rey safe, somehow, by holding her tightly. She looked at peace in the dim light, the pain he’d seen in her eyes now hidden again in the innocence of slumber. But he now knew what she had tucked away, covered up with smiles and determination.

Ben shifted ever so slightly and turned his head, squinting over his shoulder at the alarm clock on the nightstand. Rey was typically an early riser, but they’d both slept in this morning. Though it was after ten, she remained fast asleep. Ben settled back in, moving as little as possible, not wanting to wake Rey and deprive her of what was clearly a much-needed rest.

He stroked her hair as he mulled over what she had shared last night. Anger churned uncomfortably inside him at the people he had never met – would never meet – who were supposed to take care of her, but had hurt her instead. Rey’s parents had tossed her aside without a second thought, left her behind as easily someone would turn away a stray cat. Passed her off to people who would never really love her, let her end up in the house of a lecherous man who sought to take advantage of her. Ben’s arms tightened around Rey as if trying to protect her from a memory he couldn’t change or erase.

Ben’s childhood was not without its own scars. How many times had he watched with longing as his father left, or tried to catch his mother’s eyes when she was too busy to slow down for him? The rift between him and his parents had never quite healed – at some point he’d grown bitter about craving their attention and in turn began to shut them out.
But for all the times Ben’s parents had failed him, he knew that somewhere inside, they cared; he could see the unspoken question lingering in their eyes: “When did we become strangers?” The possibility of repairing their broken relationship remained, however out of reach it sometimes felt.

But for Rey… the chance to confront her parents – whether in anger or forgiveness or yearning – had been denied her.

In the short time that Ben had known Rey, she never failed to carry herself with a strength that he had respected, even envied. He now saw the source of that strength, how it had been earned, and half of him wondered how much was genuine and how much was part of her act. He resolved, though he wasn’t sure how, or quite what he meant, to not let anyone hurt her like that again.

Ben, lost in thought and lulled by the summer heat, had nearly drifted off again when Rey finally stirred in his arms. His eyes snapped back open and met hers.

“Hi,” she said quietly, her voice a little hoarse, from heavy sleep or from over-use the night before or maybe a little of both.

“Good morning,” Ben replied.

“Hmm,” Rey remarked, as she craned her neck to look past Ben and at the clock, “we’ve slept half the day away.”

Ben almost said, ‘You needed it,’ before wondering if that would come across as condescending. He finally settled on, “That’s alright.”

A moment of silence passed between them before Ben realized that he was still, still, holding Rey tightly and that he should probably let her get up. He trailed his hand along her arm as he pulled back and sat up. He felt suddenly cold, once he was separated from her warmth.

Ben was unsure how to proceed. Did Rey want to talk about last night, or leave it behind? Somehow the enchantment of their sleepy embrace had been broken, but they – or at least, he, anyway – hadn’t been returned to his former state. Instead, he focused on the mundane: the task directly in front of them, which was easy and straightforward and had a deadline.

“Checkout is noon, so I guess we’d better get ready to head out?”

“Probably so.” Rey arched her back and stretched like a cat before sitting up as well. She was likely as stiff and cramped as he was.

Rey moved more slowly than usual as she got up and readied herself for the day, as if she were moving through water and meeting resistance. Ben noticed that she was quieter than normal and hoped he wasn’t being creepy as he watched her, worry creasing his brow.

When they strapped their bags to Rey’s motorcycle and climbed on, Ben found himself holding Rey’s waist a little tighter than usual. Instead of simply clinging to her for support, he was here to hold her up as well, to offer her his own reassurance. He didn’t know how to put it into words; maybe his touch would convey the message.

Ben and Rey had been away for a mere 24 hours, yet returning to Coruscant felt like a transition to
another time, a place separated from that motel on the outskirts of Chandrila by more than a scant 218 miles. Last night, Ben and Rey’s already small world had narrowed to a double bed, inhabited only by themselves and phantoms of the past. Today’s return invited Poe and Kaydel back in.

When they entered their room at Crait Suite, neither Rey nor Ben moved to turn on the audio transmitter, preferring the quiet. Rey stared at the projection on the wall and Ben quietly observed her as she watched Bebe gnaw on a rope toy. The couple didn’t seem to be in. Ben thought for a moment before realizing that he would need his notebook to reacquaint himself with the day’s schedule, and where either Poe or Kaydel were likely to be found.

He didn’t bother.

Rey turned her back on the bright image and dropped her bag on the bed before plopping down next to it. “Yesterday was,” she paused and inhaled deeply, “a lot. Do you mind if we just…stay in the rest of the day?”

“Yeah, sure.” Ben carried his own bag to the kitchenette area and unloaded the spices and tools he’d brought back from Chandrila. He checked the fridge to see what was available. He didn’t know if he should be comforting Rey or leaving her alone right now, so he needed something to busy his hands with. “Hungry? I know it’s kind of early still, but we never stopped for lunch.”

“Always,” Rey replied, with a hint of her usual smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

"Not much in here. Potato soup alright?" Ben pulled out some leftover potatoes, along with some bacon and half a chopped onion.

"Sounds fine." As Ben set to work, Rey dug into the box she had kept her mosaic project in. She didn't add any pieces to her evolving design, instead choosing to meticulously sort the various glass bits by size and color.

When Ben had finished transforming the leftovers into a decent soup (it really should have been made with cream, or at least half-and-half, but the milk had to do), he brought a bowl to Rey, sitting next to her on the floor.

They mostly ate in silence until Rey looked up from her bowl and met his eyes. "Thank you. For..." Her voice trailed off again as she shrugged.

Ben knew she wasn't referring to the soup.

"What are friends for?" he asked. *He could say that, right? They were friends, weren't they?* Rey’s hands were full and so Ben reached over and rested his hand on her knee, rubbing a soothing circle with his thumb. "I've never been the best at this." He said gravely. "Let me know if you need anything."

Rey nodded and, though she remained somewhat tense, the tiny curve of her smile seemed a little more genuine.

When they finally went to sleep that night Ben drew Rey close to him without pause or pretense. He didn't know what words to offer her, but this he was capable of. It dawned on him that although the projection of the loft had been active all day, he hadn't given it a second glance aside from when he and Rey had arrived home. It wasn’t the first time that Ben had spent more of his day focused on Rey than on Kaydel. It was, however, the first time he recognized it. And he hadn’t the faintest idea what to do with that realization.
The next couple days passed in much the same way. Time was whiled away in companionable silence as Rey kept to herself, working diligently on her mosaic, and Ben comforted her as best he knew how, the way he had learned to from his old nanny, Elsie: with food.

Ben also exercised his own creative muscles by sketching. He opened an old sketchbook he’d brought back from Chandrila and added to it for the first time in years. He warmed up by sketching various objects in the apartment before he ended up drawing Rey.

Her hands, rough from hard work but dainty and nimble as well, as she arranged pieces on her mosaic. The curve of her back as she leaned over the project. Her face, her eyes, willful and focused and intent. Ben felt slightly guilty about drawing her without asking, as if he was intruding, and he hoped she wouldn’t mind.

After the first day, they began once again to watch the scenes of domesticity from across the street playing out on their wall. Leaving the speaker turned down or off most of the time ceased to be about ignoring the chatter and instead became its own source of amusement. Ben and Rey resumed their old game of filling the silence by “pretending” to read Poe and Kaydel’s lips and speaking for them, and elevated it to a new level, a competition to see who could come up with the funniest commentary.

Ben delighted in the opportunity to take a few jabs at Poe, especially if he could bring a smile to Rey’s face or better yet, tease laughter out of her, and so he threw himself into the game, adopting theatrical hand motions and silly voices. Ben's gangly frame adopted an exaggerated cocky swagger, and Rey leaned back into the couch with a smile as she watched him strut around in front of the projection with a ludicrous gait.

“Doll,” he drawled with Neanderthal uncouthness. “Bebe crapped in my shoes again.”

Rey giggled softly.

He switched to the airy whine he used for Kaydel. “Aw, that’s so unlike her. You must have done something to upset her! Never mind, honey – you have small feet, you can borrow my Birkenstocks.”

“I do not have small feet!” Ben-Poe squealed indignantly.

“Yeah, you do.”

“I do not! You know what they say about guys who have small feet...” Ben-Poe complained, pouting.

“In that case, your feet are tiny.” Ben-Kaydel stated bitterly.

Righting his posture from the ridiculously campy stance he’d assumed to impersonate Kaydel, Ben’s cheeks warmed with embarrassment at the realization that he’d probably just made himself look like an utter dork. But as he looked down at Rey’s genuine mirth and the sincere affection brightening her eyes, his sense of awkwardness was quickly overtaken by a rush of pride, of all things. He was so pleased to have coaxed such a reaction from her.

He maintained eye contact for a few heartbeats, as her giggles eased into a lingering smile, but when
the silence stretched out, he looked away, only just catching Rey’s furtive glance towards his own enormous feet.

Later, Rey opened the Tinder app a few times to like profiles and respond to an occasional message and it wasn’t long before she began to take an interest in actively planning Poe and Kaydel’s downfall once again. Ben eagerly followed her lead, his irritation at Poe having only grown since that night in Chandrila, and fermenting in the quiet days of contemplation that followed it.

Had Poe even realized how much he’d hurt Rey? She hadn’t said it outright, but Ben had learned that she was one for keeping things close to the vest. He had the impression that the revelations Rey had shared with him weren’t exactly coffee-table conversation. He didn’t know how much she’d shared with Poe and it didn’t affect his perception of the man - Poe had looked into her eyes, told her he cared and then walked away. That was on him, regardless.

Ben and Rey resumed tracking Poe and Kaydel’s schedules and looking for chances to exploit weak points. Not much had changed in recent days so new ideas seemed elusive, though Ben did create a couple of throwaway email accounts for the sake of posting negative reviews on Yelp about both Poe’s bar and the company he contracted with to offer flight lessons. And the couple’s continued frustration with the mysterious smell in the loft never failed to amuse. Ben and Rey also knew that the billing cycle on the credit card they’d been using was nearing its end and so the knowledge that all hell would break loose when that bill arrived was something else to look forward to.

They were out shopping (for groceries with Ben’s cash and for some mid-grade jewelry with Poe’s card) when a change finally did occur.

“‘This could be something,’” Rey said as they stood in the middle of the produce section at a nearby market.

“’What’s that?’” Ben turned to find Rey looking down at the burner phone.

She turned the screen towards him, displaying an error message that Rey had received when trying to open up the Tinder app. It was a generic message about a problem with the account and how they valued security and to contact customer service for further assistance.

“‘It could be nothing’” she admitted. “‘There could actually be some technical error or data breach or something, or,’” Rey offered a sly smile, “‘it could mean that Poe or Kaydel found this account and had it shut down. If that’s the case, things could get very interesting tonight.’”

They rushed to check out of the grocery store and skipped stopping at the jewelry boutique on the way home, but both Poe and Kaydel still arrived home first. The tension in the atmosphere was evident in their body language, even in the silence.

“‘Turn on the audio,’” Ben said, as he hurried to shove the cold items into the fridge. But Rey was already turning up the dial even as his words left his mouth.

Rey dropped herself onto the sofa in a rush, followed very shortly by Ben, and they watched in rapt attention as the scene unfolded before their eyes.

“I told you it wasn’t me,” Poe pleaded at Kaydel’s back. Bebe danced around his feet. The dog sensed the unease in the room, even if she didn’t understand it.

Kaydel stood at the window, staring out. When she’d turned away from Poe, she’d unwittingly turned towards Rey and Ben’s window and her eyes, churning with warring hope and distrust, seemed to be looking right at them.
“This happens all the time. Fake social media accounts. I got a friend request from someone who had duplicated my mother’s Facebook just a couple weeks ago!”

Kaydel chanced a glance over her shoulder at Poe’s pleading eyes, then turned away once more. “I don’t know,” she said softly. “When Jess showed me your profile…it seemed so real.”

“Kaydel, I love you. I wouldn’t do that to you,” Poe protested. “C’mon Doll, you know me.”

Ben immediately reached over and grabbed Rey’s hand, squeezing it tight. Poe’s denial might be genuine tonight, but Ben couldn’t help but think that Rey must have heard similar things from Poe before, lies and empty promises.

Kaydel seemed to consider what Poe was saying. But she didn’t give in quite yet. “Where did someone get those pictures? And why? To what end?”

“Who knows? Probably some balding, middle-aged loser that stole my pictures from Instagram or Facebook.” Poe stepped forward, next to Kaydel and tried appeasing her with a playful grin. “If you were going to set up a profile to trick some hotties into going out with you, don’t you think my pictures would be a good place to start?”

Kaydel did let out a choked laugh at that, though she then attempted to school her face back into a look of disapproval once more. “It wasn’t just your photos. It was your name and it mentioned The Resistance and everything.”

“I don’t know.” Poe shrugged. “Someone with a very pathetic life wanted to be me.”

Kaydel’s face relaxed some. It was clear in her expression that she wanted to trust him. “Are you sure?”

“Swear to God,” Poe replied. He tentatively put one hand on Kaydel’s shoulder and waited for her response.

“Okay,” she said with a small sigh. She turned towards Poe. “I believe you.”

Though Kaydel had accepted Poe’s story – and he was correct about the fake account, even if he had guessed the wrong reasoning – her posture was still a little stiff. The incident was clearly going to linger with her. Ben felt a slight twinge of guilt but pushed it away.

He reached towards the speaker set-up with his free hand and turned it down so the rest of Poe and Kaydel’s conversation was reduced to a hushed backdrop, white noise. He turned at looked at Rey, who had remained quiet.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Rey nodded a few times and finally looked away from the wall where the projection showed Poe and Kaydel making their way towards their dining table. “Yeah, I’m fine. This was good. We’re building towards the main event.”

Ben wasn’t entirely sure he believed her. About feeling fine, that is. That they had made progress towards the eventual explosion was undeniable. However, he opted not to press.
Within a couple of days, Rey and Ben were delivered another piece of good news. Or rather, the opportunity to create their own bit of good news.

Poe had suggested to Kaydel that they have a little getaway. He didn’t have any lessons scheduled for the upcoming weekend, and he had made sure to schedule extra people at the pub. The air between Kaydel and Poe had remained a little heavy and Ben assumed that Poe was trying to cheer her up.

Whether Poe’s attempt would work or not was immaterial. The important fact was that while they were off visiting a cozy hot springs retreat about an hour outside of city limits, it would give Ben and Rey the chance to sneak into the loft and plant some of their false evidence without fear of getting caught. It was only an overnighter – a last-minute deal that Poe had found on Groupon – but it would be enough.

They watched as Poe and Kaydel packed their bags and headed out on a Saturday morning, and then waited until a man, who Ben vaguely recognized from his visit to the bar at The Resistance, came by to take Bebe out for an afternoon walk and bathroom break.

Despite the early hour, Rey broke out a bottle of wine and poured herself a mugful, since they never had bothered to buy real wine glasses. Ben was slightly nervous about breaking into the loft (even though they technically had a key, they definitely were not supposed to be there) and so he couldn’t say no to a little liquid courage, filling up his own mug as well.

“Poe got Finn in the split,” Rey told Ben, her voice bitter as she watched the projection, as the man was filling Bebe’s kibble bowl.

Ben looked at Rey in confusion, the words not quite making sense.

“Finn,” Rey repeated, nodding towards the image. “We were friends before I met Poe. He’s how I met Poe, in fact. Plutt really overcharged him for some car parts. I felt bad watching the transaction go down, so I tracked him down later and helped him with his repairs to make up for the bad deal. We got along and I would come by to see him at work sometimes and that’s how I eventually met Poe.” She huffed a small sigh. “I guess I can’t be surprised that he stuck by Poe’s side in the end. They were friends first and he works for the guy but still…” She let her voice trail off.

“He’s the one missing out,” Ben assured her. It sounded flimsy and cliché but it was true. If this guy, Finn, had turned his back on Rey’s friendship, he was the one that had lost something special.

Finn eventually left, and Rey and Ben waited just a few more minutes before crossing over to the loft. Ben followed Rey around to the back entrance of the building, watching as she keyed in Poe’s entry code to admit them.

“Don’t hunch,” she commanded. “Act like you belong here. It’s less suspicious.”

As they rode the elevator to the fourth floor, Ben noticed that Rey’s hands were empty.

“Wait, did you forget the lingerie?” he asked. They had decided to forgo hiding the phone in the loft since the Tinder app lead to nothing more than an error message now, but hiding the lacy underwear was the entire reason for this visit.

“Nope.” Rey pulled aside the strap of her sage green sundress to reveal the startlingly red lace bra strap from the bra and panty set they had picked out a few weeks beforehand.
“You’re wearing it?” Ben’s throat suddenly felt very dry. It’s just a sliver of skin and lace, don’t act like a flustered teenage boy! He tried to blame his reaction on being a little tipsy, though wine wasn’t exactly hard liquor and he hadn’t all that much anyway.

“Have been all day,” Rey confirmed. Was it Ben’s imagination or was she reluctant to meet his eyes? “It adds authenticity.”

“Makes sense,” Ben managed to reply, as though it had been a perfectly reasonable and logical decision-making process. As though his traitorous mind hadn’t immediately considered how the lace looked against the rest of her skin, which probably wasn’t as sun-kissed as the freckled shoulder she’d exposed.

He was grateful to follow her out of the contained space of the elevator, down the hall, and into the spacious loft, where he could breathe more easily. Here, at least they had a plan.

Bebe came running to Rey, jumping excitedly around her ankles for attention, not paying Ben the slightest bit of attention. She clearly hadn’t been chosen to be a guard dog. While Rey knelt down to dote on the playful pup, Ben wandered the loft. It was a strange experience – seeing it from this perspective, after spending so many days watching in from the outside.

Although it was obviously a very nice dwelling place (aside from the sour odor that lingered in the air, courtesy of Rey’s fish), he could see more of the imperfections from this side of the glass, things that were obscured by distance or behind corners. The granite countertop was chipped in a couple of places along the edges, unsorted mail was wedged behind a lamp on the end table, clothing, blankets, and dog toys had been left lying around a few places and a few glasses had been left unwashed in the sink.

It wasn’t a pigsty by any stretch, but Ben found himself startled nonetheless. He had watched Poe and Kaydel for so long, intruded on some of their most private moments but here, entering their home, was the first time he had truly confronted the reality of them as real, human couple.

Ben didn’t want to dwell on that too long, lest he start to feel guilty (and he really wasn’t in the mood to feel guilty about Poe), so he walked over to the floor to ceiling windows and located his and Rey’s room across the way.

“Hey look, I’m on TV,” he joked, waving at their window and the spot where he knew his camera lens was expertly hidden between the folds of the curtain.

Rey rolled her eyes as she stood up. She didn’t move to extricate the lingerie from under her sundress though (not that Ben had been wondering about how she would remove it, or anything). Instead, she made a slow circle around the room, with a thoughtful expression on her face.

“While we’re here, do you want to mess with them a little more?” she asked with a devious glint in her eyes. “Nothing big, nothing that would lead them to think someone had actually been here but little things that are going to trip them up.”

Ben agreed and followed Rey throughout the loft, causing tiny disturbances. They poured most of Poe’s expensive shampoo down the drain and dipped his comb into the toilet. Found a binder of Kaydel’s notes and schedules from the radio station and rearranged just a few of the pages. Emptied some food into the garbage disposal, put a couple Blu-rays into the wrong cases, and untucked the sheets from the neatly made bed.

Much to his surprise, Ben didn’t feel much of anything when the string of mini-pranks took them into the bedroom that Poe and Kaydel would clearly have been intimate in. He expected it to be difficult
but it wasn’t – it could have been anyone’s room.

As they made their way back to the living room, Rey stopped by the bathroom and pulled a rumpled button-up shirt from the hamper. She stopped in front of the couch and held the shirt out to Ben. “Here, wear this,” she said.

He took it from her outstretched hand but didn’t move to put it on. “Why?”

Rey pulled a tube of bright red lipstick from a pocket hidden in the pleats of her dress. “Well,” she said, as she began to apply the lip color heavily, “Poe brought his ‘other woman’ here to hook-up at some point, right?”

Ben just held the shirt and blinked at Rey in confusion.

Rey blushed faintly. "I can’t just smear lipstick on the shirt like a toddler using finger paints. If...if lipstick were to have ended up on his collar during a make-out session, doing it this way will create a more authentic result."

Oh.

Oh.

Did she mean...? What exactly did she mean?

Ben shrugged out of his shirt and put on Poe’s. He watched Rey nervously as he buttoned it up. Her eyes darted away for a moment as he changed before she turned back to face him with determination.

"Alright,” Rey said, "this might be awkward but I need to do it." She nodded her head resolutely, as if she were convincing herself as well.

Ben nodded back. He didn’t how else to answer.

Rey put her hands on Ben’s shoulders and stood on her toes, reaching up she pressed the softest kiss against his neck, brushing the edge of the shirt collar. She pulled back a moment and brushed her fingers across the spot she had kissed. The feather-light touch made Ben’s skin tingle. Again Rey leaned in and kissed his neck, firmer this time.

His hands hung awkwardly at his side. He lifted them, faltered a moment, and then rested them lightly at Rey’s hips. She parted her lips, sucking lightly. Ben inhaled sharply at the sensation and his grip on Rey tightened. She unfastened the top button of the shirt and kissed the exposed skin there, her lips just slightly overlapping the material of the garment.

It doesn’t mean anything. This is just a means to an end.

Even as the thought ran through Ben’s mind, he lifted his arms to hold her properly. He placed one hand on the small of Rey’s back and threaded the fingers of his other hand into the hair at the back of her head, using both to pull her closer. Rey moved her mouth back to where she’d first kissed him. She dragged her teeth along his skin and he groaned out loud when she bit down.

He took two steps back, to the sofa behind him, pulling Rey with him. Ben sat without breaking their contact, tugging Rey onto his lap, her knees falling to either side of his hips.

His fingers traced the edge of her skirt, dancing along that place where the soft fabric met softer skin. It was wholly unnecessary for completing the task at hand. Rey hummed against his throat and soothed her bite with her tongue.
Ben tugged the hair gripped in his right hand lightly, nudging Rey away from his neck. Her breathing was shallow and he wondered if his eyes were as dark as her hers right now. Ben's gaze was drawn down to Rey's mouth, where the tip of her tongue darted out and swept across her lips nervously.

The moment lasted for the quickest of heartbeats and stretched out for an eternity.

There was no practical reason for Ben to tilt Rey's face to his and bring his mouth down to hers. Nibbling on her lip wasn't doing anything to help frame Poe. Holding her tight against his body had nothing to do with Kaydel.

That didn't stop him.

Rey didn't stop him either. She leaned into his grasp, her hands moving from his shoulders to circle his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair. She kissed him back with startling ferocity. It was a hungry and desperate kiss, so different from the kisses they'd shared in front of Rose.

If he kept his eyes closed, Ben might be able to feign ignorance. Pretend that it was Kaydel in his arms. That thought felt wrong and his mind pushed it away like dropping a burning hot pan.

*He should stop.*

He trailed a line of kisses along Rey's throat.

*This wasn't really about them.*

Ben found her pulse point and bit the tender skin, irrationally wanting to leave a mark to match the one she left on him.

*It was just the wine.*

Rey gasped and dragged her fingernails against his scalp and tugged at his hair in a way Kaydel never had – rough and predatory and just the right side of painful.

*Or loneliness.*

He pushed at the strap of her dress, kissing that damned red lace that had been taunting him.

*Or simple lust.*

Rey began to tug off the shirt he'd just put on.

Even without speaking them out loud, Ben’s mind knew every new excuse sounded as weak and feeble as the last. Each one was a lie, a last ditch effort to deny the truth he was afraid to face.

Rey pulled Ben’s mouth back to her own, his intoxication growing with every stroke of her lips.

Her mouth was warm against him, his hands were everywhere, desperate to memorize her. And she didn't push Ben back or tell him to stop, did she? She was responsive.

*Oh, was she responsive.*

But they *had* been drinking, even if not that much. And Ben was aware of what Rey had experienced in the past – she eagerly leaned into his touch now, but would she hate him in the morning for taking advantage of her?
That thought finally broke through Ben's desire.

“Rey.” His voice was rougher than he expected. Rey shivered in his arms.

Ben leaned back and Rey looked up at him, her eyes unfocused and questioning. Ben fought the urge to descend his mouth to hers again, to push her down on the couch and forget propriety. He forced himself to swallow heavily.

“We should stop?” it came out like a question.

Rey blinked and then nodded. “We should.”

“It’s not really us,” he said. The words felt wrong and awkward in his mouth but he wanted to give her an easy out. “We just got-”

“Carried away,” Rey finished. “Right.”

But he found it hard to let go of her. Ben hugged Rey to him gently, the motion far more chaste than before but no less desperate, at least on his end, and he rubbed small circles into her back until their breathing returned to normal.

He wasn’t sure if anything else had a hope of returning to normal. He didn’t want to retreat backward and couldn’t fathom how to move forward. Ben Solo was in big, big trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Huge shout out to my beta @colliderofhadron for helping me get this right! Couldn't have done with you!

There's a lot going on in this chapter, as we follow Ben and Rey and the growing connection between them. I hope you all like it.

Let me know what you think and if you're on Tumblr, come visit me! @orkindofamazing :)
And I Wish It Didn't Feel Like This

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And you, I always know where you are

And you always know where I am

We're taking it way too far

But I don't want it to end”

~*~*~

Rey…did not think this through.

After she’d extracted herself from Ben’s arms and climbed off his lap, her face burning and eyes looking anywhere but at his, she excused herself to go to the bathroom. Ostensibly, this was so that she could remove the lingerie she was wearing, although, in practice, she could expertly wriggle out of her underthings without removing her outerwear – a feat mastered by nearly everyone who has ever had to wear a bra.

In truth, she needed a moment a collect herself.

Rey braced her hands on the counter and stared at herself in the mirror. Her cheeks were still flushed, her hair mussed, and her lipstick smudged from kissing. However, nothing stood out quite as much as the hickey just above her collarbone, and the wine-colored stain decorated her skin like a blooming flower. She could still feel Ben’s lips, his tongue, his teeth, on her skin, leaving the mark like a brand for all to see.

But. But then he had said it was just a mistake.

“You had to throw yourself at him,” Rey accused her reflection. But even as she spoke the words, her eyes pleaded back at her. No, she hadn’t. It wasn’t just her. Ben had been an eager participant, and he’d been the one to wind his hand into her hair, pull her mouth to his, pull her body against his.

He’d also been the one to put a stop to it.

It wasn’t as though Rey had planned this, either. She had meant to leave a few smudges on Poe’s shirt, with minimal contact. Ben was right. They had just gotten a bit carried away in the moment. It was nobody’s fault and nothing to be embarrassed over. Rey grabbed a tissue to scrub off what remained of her lipstick and tossed it in the toilet. No big deal, she repeated to herself.

So why did she still feel so rejected?

Rey grudgingly pasted a smile on her face as she emerged from the bathroom. Ben had changed back into his own shirt in her absence and was twisting Poe’s in his hands. The collar of his flannel didn’t quite manage to obscure the love bite she had left on him.

Rey cleared her throat. “You can toss that on their closet floor,” she said, nodding towards Poe’s shirt. “It might get overlooked in the laundry hamper. Kaydel’s more likely to notice it there.” The
name felt heavy and awkward in her mouth. She didn’t want to invite her into the conversation, or to wonder if Ben had been thinking of the petite blonde as he was kissing her.

Not that she should mind, of course. Ben had never been unclear about his endgame.

Ben nodded and hastily disappeared through the door, while Rey crossed the room back to the couch. She tried not to let her mind dwell as she wedged the panties into the crevice of the sofa and kicked the bra under the couch. She stood up with a sigh and smoothed her sundress. She had been so eager to expedite their plan, she hadn’t considered bringing spares to change in to, and hadn’t counted on feeling quite so exposed, either.

When Ben came back from the bedroom, she affectionately scratched Bebe’s head and bade her farewell, then they slipped out and back down the hall.

At least it was just a short trip home across the street.

“That went well,” Rey said, feigning a relaxed cheerfulness as she unlocked the door to their room.

Ben nodded his agreement. “Right. They should be finding those in no time.” He paused in the doorway as Rey entered. “Is that how-?”

His voice trailed off and Rey felt her shoulders tense. “What?” she asked with exaggerated nonchalance, reluctant to turn and look at him. As if she didn’t know exactly what he was about to say. Is that how you found out?

It had been different. Not red lace, but pale blue cotton, mocking her with their casual innocence and implied familiarity. Rey had been straightening up the bedroom – ironically wanting to do something to bring a smile to Poe’s face, since they both tended to leave messes lying around – when she discovered them under the bed. Her mind zeroed in on the absurdity of just forgetting to finish getting dressed after a tryst and she’d irrationally recalled the time she found a pair of jeans on a bus stop bench, wondering how one managed to leave their pants behind.

Even worse, she hadn’t confronted Poe at that stage, opting instead to bury the offending garment deep in the trashcan and attempting, unsuccessfully, to push it out of her mind. Same as she had tried to reason away the increasing frequency of Poe’s late nights, or the way she had ignored her nagging intuition when he began to discourage her from coming to see him at the pub. Not that it mattered much in the end. It was only two weeks later that she left Plutt’s early one day and came home to find the two of them in the kitchen – Kaydel, perched on the counter, feeding Poe grapes as he looked up at her in adoration. The sickeningly sweet display, a cliché ripped from a romantic comedy movie, was almost worse than if she had caught them in a more compromising position.

“Yeah, sort of,” Rey said softly. She didn’t have to clarify whose underwear it was she had found; they both knew. What she hadn’t expected, however, was the absence of that familiar pulse of anger at Poe for what he’d done and, however illogically, at herself for hiding from it. There was a lingering pang of hurt, but it, too, was weaker than it once had been.

Ben pulled the door closed and the shadows of the room wrapped around them. Silence hung in the air for a moment before they both began to talk at once.

“I didn’t mean–” Ben’s words ran together hastily.

“This doesn’t –” Rey rambled at the same time.

“Sorry, you first.”
What didn’t he mean? Rey wondered.

Out loud, she said, “I was just going to say that this doesn’t need to be weird, right? We’re friends, aren’t we? This doesn’t need to become a whole big thing does it?” Although Rey’s words were casual, she was startled by the strength of the nervous apprehension she felt. She realized with a start that she was truly afraid of losing Ben. They were just friends, obviously...obviously. But she had let him in, he mattered to her – she didn’t want to let go of that. She held her breath for an eternity, or maybe a few seconds, as she awaited his reply.

“Exactly. Right,” Ben said, nodding like an extremely agreeable bobble-head toy. “That’s what I was trying to say, too. Friends. Yeah. We don’t need to be awkward about...what happened.”

Rey nodded back and they stared and nodded for entirely too long until Rey glanced sideways at their shadows on the wall and began to laugh nervously at the strangeness of the situation.

Ben chuckled too, and then paused, asking, “Why are we laughing?”

“I don’t know,” Rey replied, catching her breath. “I’m just...going to go change.” She grabbed her clothes and escaped to the safety of the bathroom to change out of her sundress, never so relieved to be wearing a faded tee shirt and drawstring PJ pants (not to mention, underwear) again.

Of course, avoiding the tension in the atmosphere was easier said than done, as was forgetting the way they had kissed, especially with a set of matching hickeys to remind her every time she looked at Ben or her own reflection.

That first night, Rey stayed up watching Netflix on Ben’s laptop even after he’d gone to bed, re-watching episodes of The Office that she had seen a thousand times before because she wanted a good laugh, not because she was avoiding joining him in bed or arranging a place to sleep on the couch or anything.

But after falling asleep sitting up, then waking with a terrible crick in her neck the next morning, Rey resigned herself to ignoring her embarrassment and sleeping in the bed. She attempted to remain on her side of the bed, but her subconscious self didn’t have quite as much pride and curled into Ben’s warmth. Thankfully, Ben didn’t say anything about it.

The days were a little easier, but not by much. Rey could feign interest in the Poe and Kaydel Show, and laugh with Ben at their expense. She could try to spitball new ideas for tormenting them both, though she was falling short of thinking up new angles and, truth be told, wasn’t feeling as enthusiastic about the game anymore. She didn’t feel guilty, exactly, but had grown apathetic. She could work on her mosaic, which was really starting to take shape.

But Ben’s constant presence was becoming almost overwhelming. Both her days and her nights were spent in a tight little bubble with him. For reasons she didn’t want to admit to or analyze, she craved that closeness – she knew it wasn’t going to last forever and didn’t want to think about when it was going to end. But it could sometimes be suffocating as well, as if she was underwater and needed to breathe.

It was for this reason that, one day, Rey found herself throwing on a pair of shoes and leaving the
apartment for a solitary walk to clear her head. Ben had run to the store to buy groceries and she had been reluctant to remain within the quiet stillness of their apartment, to stare numbly at the image of the empty loft on the wall. She felt especially disinclined to be reminded of the couch where she and Ben had made out, now mocking her from its prominent place at center stage.

She wandered the neighborhood aimlessly, passing places that had once held memories with Poe – as well as places that now reminded her of times with Ben. After a while, her meandering brought her to the door of Takodana Bar.

Rey walked in and, as her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she made her way towards Maz, who was shelving clean glasses under the bar. It was a Wednesday afternoon, so the place was fairly empty. A small crowd of business professionals were circled around one table, finishing off a late lunch, and a tired-looking man sat forlornly at the far end of the bar, nursing a bottle of beer.

“Rey! Good to see you again!” Maz greeted, looking up from her task to meet Rey’s eyes. “What have you been up to, my dear?” Her face brightened with a wide smile.

Well, I jumped my roommate, and I kind of regret it and kind of don’t and I’m not sure what to do about it.

“Oh, you know, the usual,” Rey said with a shrug as she hopped on to a bar stool. She took a pretzel from the snack bowl but didn’t eat it, twirling it around in her fingers instead.

“Something to drink?” Maz asked.

Rey glanced up at the dingy clock, faintly illuminated by neon signs on the wall. It was early yet and she was intent on clearing her head, not muddy it. “Just a Sprite, please.”

“Cherry?” Maz filled asked, as she filled the glass. Rey nodded and Maz added the grenadine and plopped five maraschino cherries into the drink, knowing Rey’s fondness for sweets. She slid the drink over to Rey. “Where’s your man-candy today? The Solo boy?”

Rey nearly choked as she took her first sip. “Maz!” she chided, blushing slightly. “I told you it wasn’t like that.”

“Uh-huh,” Maz muttered cynically, pointedly glancing at the fading, but still visible hickey on her neck. Rey felt her face warm; she was sure her cheeks must be tomato-red, noticeable even in the shadowy bar.

She could have worn a higher neckline to cover the mark or, at this point, even a bit of concealer would do. She hadn’t. Maybe a part of her liked the idea of people jumping to conclusions about them. She shifted her eyes away from Maz’s and plucked a cherry from her glass to eat.

Maz only smirked.

“I’m not working at the junkyard anymore,” Rey said brightly, desperate to shift the subject away from Ben.

“Good for you,” Maz said with a nod. She had never met Unkar Plutt, but Rey had vented her complaints about her (now former) boss to the woman on more than one occasion. “Found something better, then?”

“Not exactly. In fact,” Rey said, “I’m kind of looking for a more stable paycheck.” The thought had bounced around in her head ever since Ben had berated Plutt – she was used to taking care of herself, and relying solely on Ben made her uneasy. “Do you know anyone who is hiring, or do…
you? Need help around here?” Rey asked hopefully.

Maz looked thoughtful as she silently considered Rey’s proposal for a moment. “Have you even ever
bar-tended? Or worked in a kitchen?” she finally asked, skeptically.

“No, but I’m a fast learner,” Rey insisted, “and a hard worker.”

“That’s true.” Maz nodded as she thought about it. “It wouldn’t pay much,” she hedged. “I like you,
girl, but I can’t pay for what I don’t need. I could use some help on the weekends, but that’s about
it.” The tiny woman gestured widely around the near-empty room to emphasize her point. “The rest
of the time, Tuggs – that’s my cook – and I get by just fine.”

“That’d be –” Rey stopped abruptly, feeling her phone vibrate in her pocket.

  Ben: Hi just got home and didn’t see a note or anything.

  Ben: Just checking in.

  Ben: Not that you have to tell me when you have plans.

The quick series of text messages were clumsy and bumbling but they brought a smile to her face.

  Rey: I'll be back soon. I just needed some air. :)

She looked up at Maz, who was gazing at her with all-too-knowing eyes. "So, weekends. Right?"
Rey said. “Weekends would be great.”

"Fridays and Saturdays, seven to close?” Maz offered. "I'll have you serving mostly and, when
there's time, Tuggs can show you the ropes in the kitchen. We have a pretty limited menu, but you
could fill in if need be once you’ve got the hang of it."

"Perfect.” Rey nodded then looked down as her phone buzzed once again.

  Ben: Ok.

  Ben: Bought the stuff to make Monte Christos for dinner, if you want?

Rey's mouth practically watered at the thought of the sugar-dusted ham sandwiches. They may not
be gourmet, but they were definitely a favorite of hers. She sent back a simple but enthusiastic
“Yum!”, accompanied by an emoji of a cat with heart eyes.

"I see someone's distracted," Maz said with a smirk, waving off Rey's attempts to deny the fact. "Just
come in a little early Friday night and I'll have the paperwork ready for you."

"Thank you, so much, Maz. You won't regret it!” Rey stood up and dug into her wallet to find a
couple bucks to pay for her half-finished cherry Sprite.

Maz smiled and pushed Rey's hand away. "Don't worry about it. Your employee discount," she said
with a wink. "Now go ahead and get back to your boyfriend. I can tell that's who you were texting,"
she added on when Rey tried to protest.

Rey gave up and shook her head as she left, stepping out into the blinding sunlight. She hoped she
wasn't making a mistake, choosing to spend more time around the nosy woman who simply wasn’t
going to let this go. But weekend nights at a bar were loud; Maz wouldn't have that much time to
tease her, Rey told herself as she headed back to Crait Suite, feeling a little more relaxed than when
she'd first headed out.

Chapter End Notes

So I know this wasn't quite as thrilling as the previous chapter but these two have a lot of thoughts and emotions swirling inside that they need to process. They need to open up and talk it out, don't they? But that's easier said than done... They're getting there though!

I know this one took a while - sorry about that. :( Real life and writer's block got in the way for a bit. I know myself better than to promise an exact time right now, but I swear chapter 16 won't take as long! :) Come find me on tumblr if you want to talk about this fic or reylo in general or fic in general or pretty much anything, lol! @orkindofamazing

And thank you again to @colliderofhadron for not only helping me fix my errors and mistakes but also being such a wonderful sounding board and all around awesome person in general :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's not what I wanted,

but now that it's right here,

I understand it.

A story written by my own hand.

It's life biting right at your heels

I didn't plan it,

But it's finally something to feel"

~*~*~

Ben was having an existential crisis. He was supposed to be here to get Kaydel back, get his plan – his life – back on track.

Instead, he couldn't get Rey out of his mind. Couldn't stop thinking about how she felt in his arms, how her skin, her mouth tasted.

And Kaydel? Just when had she joined Poe in the ranks of those who made him see red? He couldn't hear her name, or see her smiling face on the projection without anger bubbling up inside. Kaydel had been a party to hurting Rey, a fact that he’d been aware of in some capacity or other since he and Rey had first teamed up, but somehow hadn’t fully acknowledged or confronted until recently. Instead, he’d directed the bulk of his displeasure at Poe.

However, at some point, his interest in the tidy future he’d planned with Kaydel had begun to wane – and as it did, he found himself finally accepting her own complicity in the whole matter. Thinking back, he wondered when he’d last truly thought of Kaydel with any degree of longing. He’d been on autopilot for so long without noticing, but the intensity of his desire for Rey – he had to admit it, there was no other way to put it – called into sharp relief the almost clinical way he’d been approaching his plan to retrieve Kaydel.

By contrast, there was something new and exhilarating in meeting Rey's gaze and wanting to be the one to light up her eyes, in reveling in unwrapping her secrets and wanting to know more. His mind, without consulting him, now curiously supplied him with visions of the future - a dozen different, unscripted possibilities.

It was terrifying too.

Ben had once had a plan. He’d never doubted or questioned what path his life would take and, in a couple short months, Rey had upended all of that. Her presence in his life, in his mind, had him questioning everything he knew to be true.

Because it was more than just realizing he wanted Rey (and, oh, did he want her). If Kaydel wasn't
his destiny, what did that mean for the rest of his carefully-structured life? What did it say about every other decision he’d ever taken for granted?

It was a question that Ben had no clue how to answer.

So when Rey returned to their cozy little room, he breathed a sigh of relief. Not just because she was near him again, though a part of him had to admit that helped, but because it gave him a concrete task to focus on. He had no clue how to proceed from here, but having her close by as he tried to figure it out was a comfort.

Make dinner. Eat. Worry about the rest later.

Rey looked happy as she kicked off her shoes and dropped to the couch, without sparing a glance towards the wall and the silent projection there. Ben resisted the urge to go hug her or kiss her head or just touch her in some way, any way and instead looked over his shoulder and nodded a hello as he continued to work on dinner.

There, that was a normal and rational and non-obsessive way to greet her, he congratulated himself. He could feel Rey’s eyes on him, even as he turned back to the stove top.

“Can I help with anything?” she piped up.

Ben looked around. He’d already assembled the sandwiches and was about ready to batter and fry them. “We should probably have some sort of vegetable. Want to throw together a salad?”

Rey obliged and dug into the small fridge. There wasn’t much room in the tiny kitchenette so she was right at his elbow as she tossed together the lettuce and veggies she’d found in the fridge.

“So, I found a new job today,” she said brightly. “It’s nothing big, but at least I’ll now be able to contribute.”

“That’s what you were doing?” Ben asked. He frowned at the frying pan. He didn’t want Rey to feel like she owed him something and, anyway, he still had more than enough in savings to fund this… whatever their project could be called. “You know, I’d be paying the same rate for this room, regardless.” He tried to ignore the part of his mind that dwelled on how empty the room had felt when he’d been on his own.

“The room would be the same maybe, but we still need twice as much food,” Rey replied, as she elbowed him playfully.

She sliced a carrot in silence for a moment then let out a soft sigh. She turned to face Ben, a more serious expression crossing her features.

“Relying on other people hasn’t typically worked out well for me,” she started, parceling out the words slowly. “And that’s not your problem, but I don’t want to feel like I’m indebted to you and I’d just… feel better if I’m taking care of myself. It gives me a little bit of control, alright?”

Ben’s heart pulsed with both sadness and admiration. He wanted to insist that she wouldn’t be in his debt, but bit his tongue and nodded. “Alright,” he conceded. “Hey, can you pass me that sugar?”

As Rey handed him the bag of powdered sugar he wondered, not for the first time, whether he should actually feel guilty about telling off her old boss, and effectively ending her job opportunity there. But he could really bring himself to feel regret; that oaf Plutt had been a jackass and a cheat. Hopefully, she’d found a better place.
“So what’s the job?” Ben asked as he shook some powdered sugar over the first of the two sandwiches.

“Remember Maz? I’m going to work at her bar. Takondana?”

Ben cringed just a little as Rey mentioned the woman, recalling his somewhat embarrassing encounter with her. But though she’d been blunt, she had also been kind; she wouldn’t be a bad boss.

“Just weekends for now – Friday and Saturday nights. Those are the only days she needs help,” Rey continued. She paused, a thoughtful look on her face. “Possibly Sundays nights before Monday holidays,” she mused. “Like I said, I know it isn’t much but it’s something, while we’re working on this—” she gestured distractedly in the direction of the projection, “– and I’ll figure out something more permanent later.”

“Well, if you’re happy, I’m happy,” Ben said. The old saying was more than a little cheesy and he felt a bit silly saying it but, as the words rolled off his tongue, he knew that he meant them.

Although he knew Rey preferred to be more self-sufficient, a selfish part of Ben was glad that her new job was only part-time. He wondered if he should be concerned about how clingy he was being, but reasoned his doubts away by telling himself that, once he figured out what he was supposed to do about the complicated feelings rolling around inside him, he’d feel more relaxed. At least he had the comfort of having her close by as he tried to work it out.

In the meantime, he made peace with himself by enjoying the connections he did have with Rey – their relaxed, if somewhat childish, game of mocking Poe and Kaydel (though Ben noticed his own commentary growing increasingly vitriolic), staying at the dog park long after Poe had taken Bebe home just because the late summer weather was pleasant, and enjoying a final meal out at a pricey steakhouse on Poe’s card, knowing that the account would be flagged and shut off soon enough.

By night, Ben still held Rey close, although they seemed to have an unspoken agreement to not bring up the fact that it felt considerably less platonic ever since that evening... That wasn’t just his impression, was it? He silently warred with himself, taking joy in the fact that, in these nocturnal moments at least, he was allowed to touch Rey, to keep her close, but then felt guilty for thinking that way.

On Rey’s first weekend of working, Ben found himself pulling up the website for Chandrila University and viewing it as an outsider might, for the first time. He regarded the vibrant pictures of the pristine campus, smiling students and classic buildings, and perused the admissions information, the lists of majors and departments and, after a moment’s hesitation, clicked through to the faculty information page for his department. He stared dispassionately at his own photo, noticing the look of obvious annoyance in his eyes at having been interrupted for the photo op.

Ben had never questioned his path, and he didn’t quite regret the steps he’d taken, but in the dark silence of the room, illuminated only by the blue glow of the laptop screen, he wondered if he really would have chosen this path, this career, if he hadn’t been following footsteps laid out for him long before.

Finally, with a sigh, he closed the browser and shut down the computer.
On Saturday night – well, Sunday morning – Ben left the apartment around three AM, long enough after last call that he figured Maz would have chased any lingering patrons from the bar to close up.

He’d done the same the night before, in order to walk Rey home. She had, of course, bristled at the notion that Ben thought she needed an escort home. (I’m a big girl, Ben, I can fend for myself, she’d said, I don’t need you to protect me or something). Ben had insisted that wasn’t it, even if it was, maybe just a little. But by the time they’d returned home, she’d admitted that it was nice to have someone to walk with, for the company, even if not a strict necessity. So, naturally, Ben had interpreted that as a free-standing invitation to make it a regular occurrence.

Ben paused outside the door to the Takodana Bar for a moment, then decided that, given Maz’s connection to his family, she wouldn’t mind him coming in, so he entered the bar. The room was uncharacteristically bright, the regular soft lighting fixtures rendered almost useless by the harsh overhead fluorescents that were only ever on when the day was over. He’d been correct in his assumption that the bar-goers would be gone, and both Rey and Maz were now busy cleaning up.

“We’re closed,” Maz hollered as the bells on the door chimed, her back facing him. At the same time, Rey looked up from the table she was wiping down and gave a short wave.

“Uh, it’s just me,” Ben called back. “I’m here to steal your helper.”

Maz glanced over her shoulder at him and smiled, then cast a conspiratorial look at Rey and winked at her, causing a faint blush to creep into Rey’s cheeks. “Oh, by all means, steal away,” Maz said, a teasing laugh in her voice.

“I’m not done yet, though,” Rey said in protest. “Ben, you can sit down if you want; I won’t be long.”

“Nonsense,” Maz insisted. “That’s the last table, isn’t it? Tuggs can sweep and mop up in here. He’s mopping the back, anyway. He’ll take care of it all at once.”

“I don’t mind waiting,” Ben said. He hadn’t intended to cause a disruption on Rey’s second day at her new job.

Maz sauntered out from behind the bar and snatched the towel from Rey’s hands, playfully smacking Ben with it as she walked by him. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “Take your girl home.”

It was Ben’s turn to blush then, and he felt his cheeks warm as he sputtered to find a reply. But none was forthcoming and, as Maz disappeared through the swinging door into the back room, he was left with the feeling that he really liked the way the words sounded together – your girl.

“Don’t mind her. She can be…eccentric.” As if he hadn’t learned that already. Rey smiled nervously and shrugged. “I guess my shift is over then.” She circled around the bar to hang up her apron and clock out, then joined Ben at the door. “Later, Maz!” she called over her shoulder.

“See you Friday!” returned a loud voice from the back room, muffled just slightly.

Ben and Rey stepped out of the warm bar and into the crisp night air. The streets were still reasonably populated, with pub-goers emerging from various establishments as they closed for the night, lingering on the sidewalks to socialize or wait for their taxis and Ubers.

“My feet are killing me, but I got some decent tips,” Rey said, trying, and failing, to stifle a yawn. Her eyes and nose scrunched up as she did so and she stumbled slightly into Ben’s side.

“Did you have a few drinks yourself?” Ben asked with a grin.
“Shut up,” Rey said, colliding with him again, this time on purpose and with her elbow out. “I’m tired, alright?”

Ben just laughed. He resisted the urge to toss an arm around Rey’s shoulder, to pull her into his side for a third time and keep her there. Instead he jammed his hands into his jeans pockets and listened as Rey regaled him with stories about her evening.

A few days later, Ben and Rey returned home from the laundromat to find a chaotic scene playing out on the wall. Though neither one of them had been paying a great deal of attention to it lately, the flurry of unusual activity caught their eye.

Poe’s freezer was open and its contents were strewn across the counters and table, from frozen steaks to Tupperware containers of leftovers to rapidly-melting ice cube trays. Poe held a phone to his ear but seemed to be speaking to Kaydel as the two of them carried on a forceful conversation, complete with waving arms.

Despite his declining interest in the general goings-on in the loft these days, Ben’s curiosity was roused and, after dropping a laundry basket on the couch, he turned on the speaker. Silently Rey walked up next to him and joined him.

“You expect me to believe that someone broke in, stole your credit card – from the freezer – but didn’t take, oh, the tv or the computer or anything else, and proceeded to use it solely to dine out and spend one night at cheap motel?” Kaydel’s voice was laced with irritation and suspicion as she waved the card statement in front of him.

“Well, I certainly wasn’t the one using it!” Poe shot back. “I can’t remember the last time I used it.” He closed his eyes as if in deep thought, “It might have been when I paid for some repairs on the plane. Maybe I didn’t re-freeze it; maybe it got lost then?” he mused, seemingly more to himself than Kaydel.

“And someone waited until now to use it?” she asked sarcastically.

“I heard that these days, fraudsters can recreate a physical card if they get the number, maybe that’s-” He suddenly dropped off mid-sentence and turned his attention to the phone in his hand. “Yes, I’m here,” he said into the phone, then muttered to Kaydel, “finally off hold.”

He answered a series of questions with “yes”s and “no”s and a “just today” and an irate “what are you going to do about it?” until he finally hung up with a sigh.

“Well, they canceled this card are sending it to the fraud department,” Poe told Kaydel. “The rep said they’re going to mail a document I have to sign, saying the charges aren’t mine and they’ll remove them. She acted like they’re more concerned about me completing their paperwork than with catching this guy.”

“That’s convenient,” Kaydel responded, her tone heavy with accusation.

“What does THAT mean?”

“I think you know!”
Ben reached over and turned the speaker back down until the bickering faded to nothing. Their fighting had previously given him a dark satisfaction, and he’d expected to feel a bit nervous about the prospect of the card theft being investigated, but instead, he just felt tired. Their game had given him an excuse to continue working with Rey but, other than that, the appeal had faded away. Rey too, had turned away from the screen, a hint of guilt in her eyes but no more glee.

“The FCC only investigates cases of fraud over $2,000,” she said drily, repeating something she’d mentioned back when they’d first hatched the plan, when she’d worked to convince Ben that it wasn’t too risky. “We barely broke $600; the card company is going to eat that – it’s cheaper in the long run than a full-scale investigation.”

“The important thing is that it started a fight, just as we planned.” Ben’s words were also similar to his earlier statements, but they now sounded hollow even to his own ears.

Across the way, Poe was busy loading things back into the freezer and, despite the silence, the tension between he and Kaydel was still evident in their body language.

“Maybe we should go out to eat tonight,” Ben suggested. “I don’t really want to sit and watch them argue.”

“Sure. My treat. For real this time,” Rey answered, a hint of a wry smile gracing her face despite the situation.

They left their unfolded laundry – and the bickering couple on the wall – behind as they exited the room once again.

The following weekend, Ben headed to the bar before last call and sat in a booth as he waited, slowly nursing a bottle of beer. He eventually gave up the pretense of being a patron and idly picked away at the label once the beer had grown too warm to taste good anymore.

He and Rey had spent the week with the volume on the transmitter at a low setting, tuning out the bulk of the pair’s conversation as they perfunctorily listened for any buzzwords that might indicate that Poe had received news on any sort investigation. Even without paying close attention, however, it was apparent that the atmosphere in the loft had remained frosty.

In contrast, the mood in the small apartment he and Rey shared was becoming quiet and comfortable again, despite his internal anxieties. More than once he’d tried to work up the courage to talk to Rey about his growing feelings, but always inevitably chickened out.

He’d never considered himself a coward, but then when was the last time he really put himself on the line? Had he ever? It also didn’t help that he didn’t know exactly what he wanted to say or how to put it into words.

"Hey Rey, remember that time we kissed until we were delirious and then decided to act like it didn't happen? Maybe we should try that again?" It didn't seem like the right way to broach the subject.

Besides, Rey hadn’t brought it up, so maybe she really did want to leave it in the past. Maybe the idea that it could have been anything more than physical was only in his head. Maybe he’d just taken advantage of a lonely girl and read too much into it.
"You're scaring away my tips."

"Huh?" Ben blinked as Rey's teasing voice broke through his reverie. He looked up to see the very person who'd been occupying his thoughts standing above his table, with her hands on her hips and a stern expression on her face, though her hazel eyes twinkled.

"You're scowling at everyone," she explained, motioning to the nearby empty tables with a broad sweep of her arm. "No one wants to sit by an ominous-looking grump and, while fewer tables mean less work, it means less money too."

"Sorry," Ben replied automatically. He hadn't realized he'd been frowning. At the same time, it was fifteen minutes to last call and Maz had slowly been turning the lights up. "But are you sure the sparse crowd has nothing to do with the fact that it's almost closing time and it's been raining all night anyway?" He looked up at Rey with his own teasing smirk.

Rey swatted his shoulder lightly, then, after glancing around the pub and apparently not seeing anyone in need of her attention, slid into the vinyl booth across from him.

"You were scowling though," she said, concerned. "What's wrong?"

_I want you_, he thought, and I'm afraid you might not want me but I'm too chickenshit to find out.

"Nothing really. Just getting lost in thought. I don't even really remember what I was thinking about anymore," he lied, looking away.

Rey eyed him as though she didn't believe him but nodded anyway. She picked up his nearly empty beer bottle with one hand and prodded at his pile of wrapper shavings with the other. "Want another one?" she asked. "Save up enough paper bits and you'll have the makings of a nice gerbil nest."

Ben looked down at his mess with a hint of embarrassment and cleared his throat. "Uh, no, just a water, if that's alright. And the check."

Rey rolled her eyes as she stood up. "Maz isn't going to charge you for one domestic beer, and neither am I," she said as she started to head towards the bar with his trash. She cast one last glance over her shoulder with a smile. "Though I guess you can still tip me if you feel the service was adequate," she joked.

Ben tried not to brood for the short remainder of the night, and instead found his eyes following Rey as she bustled around, tending to customers and clearing tables. Earlier, he'd barely been able to catch sight of her messy bun as she darted through the throngs of people with ease but now, as the crowd thinned and Maz eased the lights ever brighter, he was able to see her clearly again.

She smiled brightly as she brought patrons their final drinks and then, as if to nudge them along, their bills. But while she was friendly to the patrons, Ben recognized it as her 'show' grin, not the genuine smile he'd been privileged to receive - that had to count for something, right? He also couldn't help but notice the way that people looked at Rey, with a certain longing, even after she’d turned away. Ben was aware that he probably had the same desperate look on his own face, but the difference was that, even if not in the typical sense of the phrase, he was the one that got to take her home at the end of the night.

Finally, Maz turned the lights up fully and shooed the stragglers away, as Rey began cleaning duties for the night in earnest.

"I'm not taking that," she said bluntly, when she walked over to Ben's table with a rag and saw the ten dollar bill laying there.
"What? It's a tip. The service was more than adequate," Ben said with a faux provocative lilt and a cheeky grin as he stood up. He didn't miss the way Rey's cheeks pined ever so slightly at his tone and the part of him inside that warred between resignation and hopefulness cheered a little.

"I was joking, Ben," Rey said, rolling her eyes again. "I'm not taking your money. It'd be weird."

"Well I'm not taking it back, so..." Ben shrugged and then rose to his feet. "What can I do to help?"

Rey briefly looked like she might refuse but then shrugged as she picked up the money with two fingers, as though it were something offensive. "Any of the tables that have already been cleaned off, go ahead and flip the chairs up on them."

He nodded and began to walk past Rey to get started when she suddenly stopped him with a tug on one of his belt loops and jammed one of her hands into his front pocket. Before Ben could wonder what exactly was going on, she'd pulled her hand back and patted the pocket with a satisfied smirk.

"I told you I wasn't keeping your money, didn't I?"

A little dazed, Ben could only mutter out a somewhat choked, "Whatever," and then busy himself with putting up chairs as he firmly told himself not to overreact to an innocent, playful touch.

As Rey and Ben worked together cleaning the front room, Maz, who'd mercifully left them alone while the bar was open, had now apparently decided she couldn't let the night pass without at least a little meddling. She circled around from behind the bar to pluck the broom from Ben's hand as he finished sweeping the floor.

"Don't tell me you're going to be expecting a paycheck, too," she joked.

"I just wanted – to help out, he intended to say, but Maz cut him off.

"To spend more time with your little lady?" she finished, fixing him with her eyes, which were unsettlingly large behind her round glasses.

Luckily Rey had gone into the back to fill the mop bucket with new water and bring it up, and so missed Ben's sputtering, nonsensical response to the claim that he couldn't quite deny.

"You, know, I really do see your father in you," Maz continued, her voice softer this time. "I see it in your eyes – the way that you look at Rey. Just the way your father always looked at your mother."

Ben opened his mouth then shut it again, truly speechless this time. Thankfully Rey kicked open the swinging door to the back just then and pushed the mop bucket through, breaking the stillness in the air. Maz, for her part, didn't say anymore but cast a meaningful look at Ben as she walked away.

As they departed for home, conversation made nearly impossible by the need to jog back to Crait Suite in the pelting rain, Maz's words played over and over in Ben's head...

Chapter End Notes

So, I've added a tentative chapter count. :) It may change a smidge. But not too much, we're in the homestretch!
Here we get to see how Ben is dealing with the aftermath of That Night TM. Got a bit of that mutual pining before they get around to speaking up, right? Hope you enjoyed it! :)

Major thanks to @colliderofhadron for beta'ing! This would be a mess without her!
We Can’t Come Back From This

Chapter Notes

The rating on this chapter has bumped up to M. It's a fairly mild M, but I don't want to leave anyone out who prefers to read T, so inspired by a couple other authors I've seen do this, I've posted an alternate T version here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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_HOLD me tight as I tell myself that you might make sense_

_And make good what has been just so bad_

_Let's see this through_

_It's a pretty good bad idea_

_Me and you_

~*~*~*~

Rey wasn’t sure that magnolia trees could actually grow in the desert. She certainly hadn’t seen anything like the tree at Ben’s family home in or around Jakku. But whether it was accurate or not, one had found its way into the desert landscape she was crafting out of glass and tile.

She had been sorting her materials when she came across the little square – a cream colored tile with little swirls and dashes of gold that screamed late-1970s. It had been something she had salvaged a while ago – no doubt, someone, somewhere, had finally gotten around to remodeling a tacky old bathroom and tossed the remnants of its former life out on the street corner.

Rey hadn’t had anything in particular in mind when she’d gathered up the hunks of ceramic but, after visiting Ben’s home and being awed by the stately tree his great-grandfather had planted so long ago, she knew exactly what the fragments were destined to become. They were perfect – more than perfect – to be used for the rich flowers that hung fat and heavy from the tree’s sturdy branches. The occasional flecks of gold, which might look tacky when emblazoned across an entire wall, were going to add just the right pop of color to the soft, creamy petals.

Ben didn’t hover too close while Rey worked, dedicating his attention to his notebook or the kitchenette, or whatever he happened to be doing at the time and, apart from the occasional glance in her direction, she didn’t think he’d paid very close attention to the deviation from her original design. However, the more concrete the image grew, the more she felt nervous apprehension flicker through
What would Ben think of her immortalizing his significant family tree in her mosaic, its roots tangled and twisted among the prickly pears and desert dandelions that peppered the gravel? Would he read something in it? Or would he see it as just a little flourish of something new and a little different, and leave it at that?

Rey spared a glimpse over her shoulder. Ben was engrossed in his laptop, his brow furrowed as he concentrated on whatever he was looking at. Rey had the unbidden urge to smooth it away, with her thumb or maybe a kiss, to calm whatever was agitating him, as he had done for her. Flustered, she turned away, embarrassed, as though he would somehow hear silent thoughts.

Stop being so sentimental, she ordered herself. He said they were friends. That's all. She knew why he was here.

As if to punctuate her internal monologue, Bebe's chipper yap sounded softly through the speaker. Rey glanced towards the wall to see the little dog, half underneath the couch, short tail bobbing playfully. Across the room, Kaydel was perched on a stool near the counter, humming to herself and sipping a glass of iced tea as she read a book. With a shaking hand, Rey resumed her work on the mosaic. It was OK. It was fine. Nothing had changed.

And just like that, everything changed.

"Bebe!" Kaydel cried out as the dog scampered across the floor, nails clicking on the hardwood. Bebe had rushed between Kaydel's feet just as she'd risen from her seat to carry her empty cup to the sink.

"Bebe," she said again, her tone shifting towards confusion and a hint of fear. "What do you have there, girl?"

Rey had looked back up at Kaydel's first shout. She blinked but was otherwise frozen. There was a flash of vibrant red in Bebe's mouth. An apprehensive shiver washed over Rey. She wasn't completely sure if she was eager or nervous to see what was about to unfold.

"Ben," she said quietly, barely above a whisper herself. "Turn up the volume."

Ben, startled from his contemplation, looked up. "Huh?"

Rey nodded at the screen. "It's happening," she said, by way of explanation. "Turn it up." She hoped the irrational nerves she felt weren't obvious in her voice.

Ben did as she requested and they both watched in rapt silence as Kaydel leaned down and tugged the fabric from Bebe's jaws, dangling it distastefully with two fingers in front of her. The lace, once so pretty, had been mangled by the dog's teeth, but there was no mistaking it for anything other than a bra. Rey watched as an array of emotions flitted across Kaydel's face - fear, anger, doubt, and finally a sickening realization. In spite of herself, Rey felt a pang of sympathy for the other woman.

Ben set his laptop on the small table and walked closer to the projection. Rey stayed where she was on the floor, pointedly avoiding Ben's face. She didn't want to watch him, to see excitement blossom in his eyes.

"Poe," Kaydel called in a strangled voice. She cleared her throat and repeated herself.

"What's up, doll?" Poe's voice wafted in from another room.
“Just... Come out here.” Kaydel traced Bebe’s steps, nudging her doggie bed with one toe, glancing in the basket of chew toys as if expecting to find a collection of gnawed-on bras.

Rey watched, partly in dread, as Kaydel dropped to her knees to look under the couch, where Bebe had finally discovered the bra. She was pulling up the couch cushions, and her hand clasped around what Rey knew must have been the matching panties, garbling a choked sound of distress just as Poe sauntered into the room with a bland look of curiosity on his face, completely clueless about the chaos that was about to erupt around him.

Poe wiped his hands across an already sweaty tee shirt - he must have been running on the treadmill he kept in the spare room - and opened his mouth to speak. He didn't get the chance, however, as Kaydel stood up and threw a wad of red fabric at him with a surprising amount of force, given the material.

“What the actual fuck?” she screamed, trembling where she stood.

Poe blinked, looking utterly taken aback. “Kay? What’s gotten into you?”

"What's gotten into me? What's gotten into ME?!" Kaydel stomped over to him, retrieving the underwear from the floor and shaking the garments at him. “What are-What is the meaning-“ her words trailed off. She took a breath and started again. “Bebe found herself a new toy,” she spat. “Care to explain?”

“Where on earth did she get this?” Poe took the mangled bra from Kaydel, somehow not recognizing the depth of Kaydel’s fury in his genuine confusion. “Did she find it at the dog park?”

“Try the couch!” Kaydel burst, jabbing a finger into his chest roughly.

Understanding finally washed across Poe's features, followed by irritation and defensiveness. “Hold on a minute,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “You're not trying to accuse me of.”

“Well, they certainly aren't mine. I didn't leave them there.”

“Neither did I!”

“No, but some tart you brought here obviously did!”

“What? Kaydel, doll! You know me - I love you! How could you think I’d…I’d…?” His question trailed off in defeat.

“Then how did they end up here?” Kaydel’s voice cracked on the question, pain bleeding through her anger.

“I... I don't know,” Poe said with a helpless shrug.

“You had an excuse for the perfume, for the Tinder profile, for the credit card,” Kaydel said with desperation, “and I believed you. But you're finally out of excuses, aren't you?”

Poe tried to reach out to Kaydel, and she flinched away.

It went on for some time, Poe pleading to Kaydel; Kaydel rejecting his words, turning away from his
grasp. Ben and Rey hardly moved as they watched the scene unfold, watched Kaydel throw up her hands in frustration, watched Poe follow her to the bedroom, then emerge again with a duffel bag over her shoulder. *She was going to crash with a friend,* she declared, *she'd come back for the rest of her stuff later.* Poe watched, dejected, as she stormed out the door.

Rey forced away the brief twinge of guilt that nudged at her. Poe might not be guilty now but he’d certainly been guilty before. She wasn’t going to pity them. *She wasn’t.*

She looked away and asked Ben to turn the sound back off when Poe kicked at Bebe's basket of toys, sending balls and chew toys flying in all directions before collapsing onto the couch to hang his head in his hands. Bebe, thinking it was time to play, eagerly chased after a squeaky rabbit toy and dropped it at Poe's feet, cocking her head in confusion then nuzzling his leg when he didn't react. It was entirely too personal to be a part of.

“So,” Rey declared, eyes darting around the now too-quiet room; she didn't want to watch Poe anymore, nor look directly into Ben's eyes right now. “Mission Accomplished, right?” Her attempt at joviality sounded hollow even to her own ears.

“Right,” Ben parroted back, sounding a little bewildered himself.

He was probably a little in shock, Rey reasoned to herself - it could be overwhelming to want something for *so long* and finally achieve it. The thought came to her, paired with a darker, more selfish one. *This was going to be the end.* Ben attaining his goal was going to be their goodbye. She was startled by the potency of her panic at the notion.

“You'll have to wait until tomorrow to call Kaydel or go find her or anything,” she informed him, working hard to keep emotion out of her voice.

"Oh.” He turned towards Rey, though she kept her eyes down, studying a single piece of tile with gratuitous attention. “I, uh..."

"It'll be a tad suspicious if you call her out of the blue. So give it a night," Rey said, as though she were discussing the weather and not the impending breaking of her heart.

Because try as she had to deny it, that's what was going to happen. Ben would go back to his pristine life and Rey would be left longing once again.

“I mean…” Ben began to stammer, “actually-"

_Not yet!_ Rey took a breath to attempt to calm the anxious dread that rushed through her. *Not yet. Just a little more time,* she begged of fate or God or whatever shooting star might grant her wish.

“But tonight, we can celebrate,” she announced, dropping the tile she’d been flipping over and over in her fingers. Her voice was a little high and frantic; she hoped Ben didn’t notice.

“Celebrate?” Ben seemed to have lost the ability to form complete sentences. He looked at Rey and she finally met his gaze.

Rey nodded. “Celebrate a job well done.” She forced the corners of her lips to raise, a coy smile to mask her fears. “We've worked hard; we deserve it.” She reached for his hands. It was a bad idea, but that wasn't going to stop her.

She pulled him to the bed and pushed against his shoulders to urge him to sit down. Rey wasn't exactly short, but Ben was so massive that even with her standing up and him sitting, she wasn't much taller than him. She stood between his legs and reached for his hair, that stupid soft hair she'd
touch for the last time, tangling her fingers into the locks and tilting his face to hers, kissing his mouth hard, desperately. There was no tentative beginning this time.

She'd be broken when he left regardless. She might as well make the pain worth her while. Rey whimpered slightly at the thought and hoped that Ben would assume the sound was borne of desire.

Maybe he did, because finally, he came to life, opening up to her, matching her intensity with his own, reaching for her hips and tugging her body closer to him as he pulled her onto his lap and sent them tumbling backward on the bed. Rey caged his body with her own limbs; she felt like a panther toying with its prey as she nipped at his skin, dragged her tongue against the outline of his collarbone. She pressed her body against his as she bit down, if not hard enough to break the skin, at least hard enough to mark him thoroughly and emphatically. He groaned as she did so, jerking under her touch, and she smiled in spite of herself.

She did that to him, wound him up with her tongue and her teeth and just a little nudge. She might have to give him back to Kaydel tomorrow, but for just tonight he was hers and Kaydel would be able to read the evidence of that truth on his skin.

Rey tugged at his clothing, thankful that his button-up shirt meant that she didn’t have to choose between getting rid of the layers of fabric between them or pressing her lips to his. Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said of her own tee shirt and she had to sit up to hastily yank it over her head. She flushed as Ben’s eyes raked over her.

“Rey,” he said, between heavy breaths, his voice questioning. “We’re doing this? This is –”

Rey ducked her face to his, kissing him deeply and cutting off his statement. She didn’t want to hear him say this wasn’t about them again, or that it was a one-time thing. She wanted to ignore the future while she could and just focus on this moment.

“Do you want me to stop?” she asked, her voice little more than breath against his lips when she broke the kiss. She didn’t want to hear his reasons but she wasn’t going to push for something he didn’t want, either. She kissed his moles and nipped at the junction of jaw and throat. “Tell me to stop now and I will.”

“God, no,” he growled in reply, rolling his hips against hers, one of his hands finding its way into her hair and pulling her mouth back to his. “Don’t stop. I want this.”

Good, Rey thought. Who cared that it was just lust? The high of succeeding in his plan but without the real object of his affection around to release this energy with? He wanted her for now and that would have to be enough. She’d worry about picking up the broken pieces tomorrow.

They were a tangle of limbs and a flurry of motion, stealing kisses and touches between stripping each other and themselves.

Rey gaped openly when she finally had Ben bare beneath her. He was a big man, anyone walking past him on the street could see that. And every inch of him matched up to his stature, confirming what she’d suspected when she’d felt his arousal straining against his jeans that time they’d made out like teenagers, or the handful of times she’d politely pretended to ignore his morning wood after they’d woken up curled together.

“Wow,” Rey breathed, from where she perched on his thighs.

He had the audacity to look shy under her gaze. “Good wow?” he asked, his tone surprisingly vulnerable.
Rey bit her lower lip as she nodded. “Very good wow,” she confirmed. She traced her fingertips along the trail of fine, dark hair leading south from his belly button, smiling when his eyes rolled back in his head as she finally gripped him with one tentative hand, stroking gently. “Kaydel's a lucky woman.”

Ben immediately lifted his head, locking his gaze with Rey's. “Rey…” he said, his voice pleading, “you can't th –”

"Shh," Rey leaned over to press her lips to Ben's cheek, chaste and gentle in comparison to her previous kisses. He clearly didn't want to invite his precious forever-girl into this little moment of weakness. “Forget I said anything. I won't mention her again.”

“Good,” Ben replied, turning his head to capture Rey's bottom lip with his teeth.

Rey sank into the sensation of his touch a moment before she climbed off and stood up, earning a petulant murmur of protest from him. The sound died in his throat however and his eyes widened as he watched her peel the leggings and panties from her legs, removing the last layers that obstructed them, and something inside Rey preened at the look that Ben was giving her.

“Rey,” Ben lifted himself from his reclined position and reached out for her. She smirked at his need as she crawled back across the bed to him, hunting him. She resumed her earlier actions with fervor, attacking lips and neck and chest with her hungry mouth, reveling in the guttural sounds she was drawing forth from Ben.

_Does she make you feel this good?_ Rey thought but didn't say. She viciously hoped that Ben would remember this night, long after the hickeys she left on him had faded, when he and Kaydel were off in Chandrila in some picturesque little house with their two-point-five kids and a dog, he'd touch his neck and remember that Rey was the one to challenge him, long for how she had made him feel.

He had come alive under her touch, matching her intensity, kiss for kiss and bite for bite. His hands roamed her body, by turns tracing feather light touches along her skin, setting her on fire, as though he was reading her with his fingertips, then gripping her hips so tightly, she was sure she'd bruise by morning.

She moaned wantonly when one hand curled around the back of her neck as the other made its way between her legs, where she was hot and desperate for him. Even as she lifted herself to grant him better access, she whimpered; his fingers alone would ruin her for other men and she braced her hands against his broad chest to keep herself upright as her body shuddered from his attentions.

“Ben, I… I…” She had planned on being the one in control here but she could hardly think straight.

“It's OK Rey, let go.” Ben's voice was softer than his touch, gentle where his fingers were demanding and the contrast finally pushed her over the edge, leaving her gasping and weak as he worked her through her high and back down to earth.

Tears pricked at the back of Rey's eyes as she looked down at Ben's; the intensity she found there was almost too much to bear.

_How was she supposed to go back to not having this? She was tormenting only herself._ Rey leaned down, screwing her eyes shut as she stole a frantic kiss, pushing the thought of impending loneliness away. It was soft, much too soft, the way that Ben slowly traced his tongue along the seam of her lips and sighed as she opened to him.

With a shuddering breath, Rey reached between them. She'd neglected Ben for far too long and it
was time to remedy that. He practically jumped under her touch, as if electrified, and let out a needy whine, surprising coming from a man his size, and typically so put together, as she caressed him.

“Rey, I don't,” he choked out between pants, “I don't have… a condom or anything……I uh… I didn’t plan-”

“I'm clean,” Rey breathed. She didn't want to ruin the moment by pointing out that getting tested had been a top priority when she found out Poe had been cheating on her. “And I'm on the pill. You?” she asked hopefully.

"Me too,” he breathed and Rey exhaled in relief. "Clean, I mean, not on the pill." She giggled in spite of the situation at his awkward reply.

“Good,” she said, as she refocused, lifting herself on her knees again and scooting forward to position herself above him properly. “Because I'm not sure I could have turned back,” she said honestly and she finally, finally sank down on him, the sensation, perfectly, almost unbearably full, stirring something deep inside her, something not purely physical that had her chest tightening.

Overwhelmed and needy, it wasn’t long before they began to move again in unison. Rey rode Ben with ferocity and he met her every move with rough thrusts of his own, reaching up to palm at her breasts and stroke her hair as if he couldn't bear the lack of contact.

Rey cried out when he shifted beneath her, sitting up and pulling her chest flush against his own. She circled her arms around him, nails digging into his back as the new angle, somehow bringing him closer and deeper, threatened to overwhelm her; everywhere that their skin touched sparked with static electricity. A petty part of her hoped Kaydel would also see the crescent moons her nails left, red against Ben's pale flesh.

His breath on her neck and ears provoked goosebumps on her skin and shivers throughout her body as he babbled feverishly against her skin, a garbled, mostly incoherent stream of sound and gasps but a few words made their way through the haze and it was the way he said her name, a deep, somber chant of “Rey” exhaled against her skin, a whisper between the two of them that was going to be her undoing.

“Ben,” she moaned, not caring how needy she sounded, as she clung to him, let him take over, her limbs more jelly than muscle and bone by now, as she hurtled towards the precipice once again.

_I could stay right here, like this forever._ The thought, aching and honest, flitted through her mind unbidden, and the startling, unattainable truth overwhelmed her, sending over the edge as a torrent of emotion washed over her. The tears that had threatened earlier did spill over as she buried her head in the crook of Ben's shoulder, biting down on his tender flesh once more to keep from sobbing. He followed after her then, grunting as he pulsed, then stilled within her. Rey wasn't sure how long they sat that way, clinging to each other, sweat covered bodies cooling in the still room, quiet but for their heavy breathing as they came back down.

Rey whimpered at the loss of contact when Ben pulled out, mourning not just the end of this particular moment of intimacy but the finality of their entire relationship. Her body felt sore and worn out in the best way - and her soul in the worst.

But Ben kept stroking her arms and back, soothing her; it was enough to make her want to cry again but she held it in, using the excuse of post-orgasmic exhaustion to hide her face against his chest until she could school it into a calm enough expression so that she could make her way to the bathroom to clean up - and to rein her emotions in.
When she returned, Ben watched her, followed her movements with wide eyes. “That was...” his voice trailed off.

Rey smiled softly, sadly. “Yeah, I know.”

She climbed into bed; her anxiety about what the next day would bring was tempered only slightly by the rush of pride she felt as she took inventory of the marks she'd left on his skin.

"Rey," he began again, slowly, as he pulled her into his arms.

But she wasn't ready to talk, to break the spell. She kissed him, the barest brush of her lips and trailed a finger over one of the love bites she'd left behind. “I'm tired,” she said. *True, even if an incomplete truth*. “Wait until tomorrow.”

Ben nodded as Rey turned, tucked herself with her back against his chest to hide the sorrow she wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep out of her eyes, taking a small bit of comfort in falling asleep in his arms for the last time.

Chapter End Notes

So. A lot going on here, right? No more hiding behind Poe and Kaydel . . .

Biggest thanks to @colliderofhadron for all her help and encouragement!
Ben would not call waking up next to Rey commonplace, but at this point, it wasn't exactly new, either. Once they'd dispensed with the game of taking turns sleeping on the loveseat some time ago, it had only been a matter of time before they'd reached the unspoken agreement that it wasn't that weird if they ended up curled together.

Waking up next to Rey like this, however, was very new.

Every inch of her skin was warm and soft against his own, each tiny shift of her body set his nerve endings on fire, the memory of how they had moved together, the sensation of her lips - her teeth - against his skin, still fresh and tangible. As she slept, her slow and even breathing contrasted sharply with the heated moans and desperate gasps that had filled the room the night before. It was a situation he was rather looking forward to repeating.

It was still a bit unreal. Confronted with the realization that what Ben always thought he wanted was, in fact, what others wanted for him, he was left reeling, directionless. When Rey kissed him, he was no longer drifting, but finally tethered to something real.

If Ben hadn't been so adamant about pursuing a particular vision, he might have noticed much sooner how his interactions with Kaydel had been a matter of habit and expectation, not desire.

Rey, on the other hand, was a creature of fire and drive and passion. Last night, she had advanced on him, pursuing him like a hunter. And he very much enjoyed being caught by her.

Ben wound his arms tighter around her, pulling her closer and throwing one leg over her hip, eliminating any sense of distance or space between them. He nuzzled his face into her hair, drunk on the heady scent that was Rey (accented with an acrid tinge of sweat that spoke to their frantic activities the night before).

Rey mumbled incoherently in those last moments between sleep and wakefulness, rousing in his arms. The motion shifted her body pleasantly against his, further encouraging the fledgling erection already stirring between the simple nearness of Rey and the memory of her heat, as her touch swam through his senses.

He smiled against her when she let out a small, contented moan, rocking back against him. His eyes stung, dry from accidentally sleeping in his contacts, but there was no way he was tearing himself
away from Rey's body for something as mundane as putting in eye drops. He lifted one hand to Rey's neck, drawing her hair back and leaning down to nip at the junction of her neck and shoulder. He could really get used to mornings like this.

Suddenly she stiffened under his grasp. "Ben?" she questioned, her voice still rough with sleep.

Rey twisted around in his grasp, shifting onto her back to gaze up at him with a quizzical expression. But he barely lifted his lips from her skin, allowing his mouth trail across her body as she turned. He slid along the mattress, intending to give proper attention to any inch of her that had been neglected the night before; a kiss to the crook of her elbow, a nibble of the tender underside of her wrist, a stripe licked along her bottom rib.

"Ben, I - ah!" Rey stammered between breathy gasps, her eyes questioning, even as her body arched into his touch. "What are you doing?"

"Being very thorough," he said with a smirk, placing an open-mouthed kiss on her hipbone, and biting down ever so slightly.

"But why?" Her voice broke a little on the tiny, weighty syllable and, finally registering the confusion in Rey's voice, Ben lifted his head.

"What do you mean, 'why'?" he asked, perplexed.

"Why…?" her voice trailed off again as she gestured between them. "Why are you still doing this?"

"Why wouldn't I?" A pit began to form in Ben's stomach. Was she regretting last night? A delirious blur of images flashed through his memory. She'd been enthusiastic; she'd been… very enthusiastic. What could have changed?

"I thought you'd be, you know, eager to get back to…" Rey looked toward the projection on the wall and shrugged. Ben had rarely seen her at such a loss for words.

He followed her gaze then snapped his eyes back to her, incredulously. How could she think he still gave two shits about what was going on at Chez Dameron? True, a surprising wave of guilt and nausea had rolled through him as he'd watched their relationship fall apart by his hand. But it hadn't lasted, not with the memory of how they had hurt Rey. And especially not after she had pulled him to bed, pushing any lingering thought of that other couple from his mind. "After last night? You still think I care what they're up to?"

"You came here to follow after your destiny didn't you?" Rey's voice wavered, and her eyes held pain, despite the steady look Ben could see her trying to compose on her face. He crawled back up the bed, kissing her mouth quickly but hard, fierce, wanting to chase that look from her eyes.

You're my destiny he thought, opened his mouth to say.

But he stopped himself. That wasn't true, was it?

It wasn't some grand plan that led them here. Fate hadn't dragged Rey through a series of uncaring foster homes or decreed she be tossed aside by men who didn't deserve her, in order to deliver her into his arms. It wasn't destiny that led Kaydel out of Chandrila and into Dameron's bed.

No.

A series of choices had brought them here. Their own choices - and the choices of others. Each action, every decision along the years, some mundane, and others monumental, until they ended up
at this moment, with a new question before them, yet another choice to be made.

Ben had allowed many people to make his decisions for him, acquiesced and followed along. His inaction had been its own sort of action, in a way.

But no longer.

Kicking his legs free of the sheets, he rose from the bed and crossed the small room in three quick strides. Ben roughly yanked the lens of the camera obscura from its purposeful and perfectly positioned mount, ripping not only the contraption, but also the blackout curtains he'd hung a lifetime ago away from the window. The morning sun streamed in and for the first time in months, and the shabby room was instantly filled with unfiltered, natural light. Ben squinted against the sudden, almost overwhelming, brightness as he turned around to see Rey, sprawled across their bed, bathed in light, watching him in curious confusion.

"Fuck destiny," he growled as he strode back to the bed, slower this time. "I'm tired of feeding into the notion that someone or something else is in control of my life. I thought I was fulfilling some grand cosmic plan by going along, but it's an excuse, isn't it? I could have made up my own mind at any time, couldn't I?"

"What exactly are you saying?" Ben could see the fear still lingering in Rey's eyes, though a flicker of hope was struggling to break through.

He sank back onto the mattress, crawling across the bed to lean over her.

"Rey, I want you. Not because I'm supposed to want you or because fate dictates it." His voice dripped with disdain as he spat the word he'd once lived by.

"Ben," she breathed, her voice hitching slightly, the lone syllable heavy with both doubt and longing.

"Not the stars," he kissed her again. "Or my family." His mouth found the sensitive spot behind her ear that he'd discovered last night, making her gasp. "Or any higher power." He trailed a row of kisses down her neck.

Rey shifted beneath him, lifting herself up on her elbows to stare down at him, her eyes bright with restrained tears. "So last night wasn't just…nothing?"

"Last night was everything," Ben said forcefully. "At least to me. I want you, Rey." He lingered just above her left breast, getting lost in the erratic heartbeat he found under his lips there. "I choose you," he mumbled against her skin.

The declaration hung heavy in the air between them, labored breathing echoing throughout the small room. Ben stared up at Rey, his heart beating erratically in his chest as he awaited her reaction. She was still, aside from her rapidly blinking eyes, and the emotion contained in them was impossible to read.

Then at once, Rey reached to cup his face in her hands, tugging him almost roughly to her and capturing his mouth with her own, the kiss nearly violent with need.

"Say it again," she whispered hoarsely, when they finally broke apart, panting for air.

"I want you, Rey," Ben obliged, kissing the saltwater tears that had escaped at the corners of her eyes. "Just you." Always you, he added to himself, I love you. The final thought rolled over him, unexpected but easy, nearly following his other words right out of his mouth before he bit them back.
Even given this moment - the absolute *rightness* of having Rey in his arms, the sun warming their skin, the room bright around them after they'd been hiding in darkness for so long it felt like too much, too soon to blurt out now.

"Didn't I do an adequate enough job of convincing you last night?" Ben asked instead, twisting his lips into a smirk, in an attempt to lighten the mood before he did something outlandish, like drag her down to city hall, still wrapped only in a sheet, to elope.

"I…" Rey gave a shuddering sigh and let her eyes flutter shut. Her voice was still shaky as she began again. "I wanted it to be real," she said, her voice low and tentative. "But I was afraid to - couldn't let myself - hope. I mean, what have we been doing all this time?" Opening her eyes, she finished with a shrug that was far too rigid and tense for the casual demeanor she was trying to feign, and Ben's chest tightened.

He couldn't exactly blame her. She'd watched as he schemed to win over another woman, listened as he laid out his plans for the future with Kaydel. All the while, he'd been falling for Rey. But he hadn't even let himself in on that fact, much less Rey, until the truth of it had finally overwhelmed him.

"I don't think I'd caught up on *what we've really been doing here* until recently," he admitted. Ben traced one hand up and down Rey's side languidly, absentmindedly. He shifted to lay on his side next to her, propping his head up with one arm and looking down at Rey, not wanting to glance away for even a moment. "When I was in college, I didn't take one single class that didn't help me graduate - if it wasn't for my degree, it was to meet a general education requirement," he mused. "I thought everything was figured out. Until you took me by surprise." Ben brushed a strand of hair from Rey's eyes.

"I'm nothing if not unpredictable," Rey joked feebly.

"You *did* almost run over me with your motorcycle," Ben said with a playful grin.

"Hey! Maybe you should watch where you're going," Rey returned with a teasing swat at his chest and a faux indignant scoff in her voice.

Ben hummed against her throat. "I can forgive it," he said against her skin. "Feel free to knock me off my feet anytime." He scooted further down the bed, continuing his exploration of her body, resuming what he'd begun when they'd first woken up. Rey gave a breathy gasp that morphed into a moan, and this time it was Ben's turn to render her incapable of speech for a while.

They hardly left the bed for the entire day, save for trips to the bathroom (at some point Ben *did* have to remove his contacts and give his dry eyes a rest) or to cross the small unit to the kitchenette for snacks. They didn't talk much - Rey still seeming to prefer action to words.

Whenever Ben tried to say something that even hinted at making plans, Rey effectively derailed the conversation with a kiss or a touch - not that Ben could find it in himself to complain. But she smiled and blushed at his endearments towards her, rather than trying to fight or deny them. And as much as he longed to hear Rey voice her own feelings, he'd take what she offered.

Eventually, nightfall found the pair of them lounging on the itchy loveseat for a change of pace, with a box of pizza balanced between them. As insatiable as they were, having finally given themselves
over to the desire that had been simmering for so long, even they needed a break.

Well, somewhat. Ben wasn't eager to let go of Rey, and she didn't seem to mind his clinginess - or she hadn't tried to push him away at any rate - so as they reclined to eat, he'd grabbed her feet, draping them across his lap and tracing circles into the soft skin of her ankle.

Out of habit, Ben glanced towards the wall that had served as their home theater for so long, now stark and blank, and then towards the window itself. It might take some getting used to - that unobstructed pane of glass, the presence of the real world they'd shut out as they resided here in their bubble. Ben found himself vaguely wishing they were somewhere else, maybe Chandrila, or somewhere even more remote; where the sky would be filled with stars, not smog, and the view would be of open space, not brick and steel and concrete. Somewhere away from Poe and Kaydel and the weight of a world he wasn't ready to share Rey with.

Rey, noticing his silence, followed his gaze towards the dim loft across the way. Without Ben's makeshift camera and projector, they could no longer see in with ease. "Are you wondering what's going on over there?" she asked, her voice quiet.

"No," Ben replied honestly. He felt vague inklings of guilt, but no longer any real curiosity about their lives.

"I expected to feel happy," Rey admitted. "I don't want to feel bad for them."

Ben nodded. "By all counts, they deserved it. Or that's what I tell myself. But I don't feel good about it anymore."

Pity, he suddenly realized. He pitied them. As angry as he had been at Poe, and as much as that anger had grown to include Kaydel, it was overshadowed by something stronger.

He pitied them, not only for the role he'd played in the demise of their relationship but in the sense that he suddenly felt as though he'd discovered something, something real and fundamental that they were missing out on.

Rey sat up and reached across the pizza box awkwardly perched against her outstretched legs to lay her hand on top of Ben's, stilling his absentminded strokes against her skin.

"Maybe I," she said, then paused and inhaled a deep breath before starting again. "I never did want Poe back - I wasn't lying about that, I wasn't in denial. But I think part of me was jealous, of both of them. And maybe I…maybe we…just don't have anything to be jealous of anymore." Her voice was low and confessional and the vulnerable tone that colored her soft and tentative 'we’ sent a rush of want through him.

We.

Ben shoved the pizza box to the floor, heedless of the crumbs and crusts spilling across the carpet and tugged Rey into his lap. "No," he murmured. "We have nothing to be jealous of."

The contentment Ben felt as he drifted off was calmer, deeper than anything he'd experienced in a long time, perhaps all his adult life. Once again, he'd held Rey's body flush against his own, yet something significant had shifted; he didn't need to clutch desperately at her as if she represented
something fleeting and temporary, which might vanish at any moment. Rather, Rey's easy breathing in time with his, her skin against his own, was a promise of whatever was yet to come, an unwritten future.

So when he awoke to find a cold and empty patch of rumpled sheets next to him rather than the soft warmth of Rey, a jolt of panic coursed through him, his mind dissecting the blur of passion they'd spent the previous day in, looking for red flags.

The moment faded quickly, however, as the fog of sleep left his mind and his senses awakened. The sound of butter sizzling in a pan, the warm and bready scent of pancakes lingering in the air, the muted clatter of someone trying to stay quiet as they bustled around a kitchen. Or, in this case, the tiny nook in the corner of the room that served as a kitchen.

Ben sat up, reached for his glasses and put them on, the haze of the sunlit room sharpening into focus. He blinked as he took in Rey's form moving around in the small kitchenette. She had donned Ben's discarded shirt from two nights ago - neither of them had bothered to get dressed the day before - and though she wasn't particularly tiny, the cotton button-up dwarfed her slim frame. The effect was both endearing and incredibly alluring. While he had appreciated the opportunity to admire her bare body, he had to concede that he really enjoyed seeing her wearing his clothing, too.

A smile crossing his face, Ben found his boxer briefs on the floor and tugged them on before ambling over to Rey and wrapping his arms around her.

"Hey!" She startled for just a moment and then sagged back against him. "You were supposed to be asleep," she chided playfully.

Ben rested his chin on Rey's shoulder and turned to nuzzle her neck, tonguing at the fresh, burgundy bloom of a hickey he'd left at some point the night before with a little swell of pride.

"Mmm," Rey hummed at his touch. "I was going to surprise you."

Ben lifted his head to glance at the stovetop in front of them, where golden pancakes were sizzling in butter on the frying pan.

"I'm sure you would have done something more gourmet or used organic eggs or, I don't know, cloves or some spice I wouldn't think of," Rey tilted her head to meet Ben's eyes for a brief moment. "But you're always cooking for me and I guess...I wanted to return the favor?" She turned back to the task at hand, flipping a pancake with a forced shrug. "I know it's not fancy but this is one thing I can cook. Even if the batter mix has gone stale, copious amounts of butter make anything taste decent."

She finished her explanation with a laugh, but even so, Ben heard the hint of nervousness in her rambling.

*It wasn't really about the pancakes.*

He'd all but confessed his love to her yesterday - even if he hadn't used that weighted word - but she had been flustered and uncharacteristically shy. He recognized it now. This was her response, her own admission.

"They look delicious," he growled, with a bit more emotion than breakfast food typically inspired.

The last couple pancakes burned when Ben hauled Rey up onto the sliver of remaining uncovered countertop and began to tug at the buttons of her - *his* - shirt, but there were several already cooked and left unscathed and it seemed like a fair enough trade with her in his arms.
"Have I told you that pancakes are my favorite breakfast food?" Ben asked, standing between Rey’s legs and nuzzling his face into her neck.

"No. I'd have marked you down for Eggs Benedict or something ‘fancy’ like that." Rey sighed at his attentions but retained the wherewithal to reach over and turn the burner off, haphazardly pushing the frying pan towards the back of the cooktop, although the charred smell had already begun to mingle with the sweetness in the air.

"Well, it's not. It's pancakes." If Ben were honest, pancakes hadn’t always been his favorite breakfast food; in fact, he'd never much thought about it. It was a recent development. Very recent. As in, within the last ten minutes. But he didn't really consider that fact especially pertinent.

Rey had made him pancakes, and so pancakes were now his favorite. He didn't let go of her as they shared their breakfast - Rey was right, even without syrup, ample butter made them tasty, as did the nuts she'd sprinkled in while cooking.

They wouldn't be able to ignore the rest of the world forever, tucked away in their little bubble here, but for now, he was content with the woman he wanted in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been so long! Hope the fluff makes up for the wait! <3 I know some of you were worried about impending angst, but Ben and Rey have spent so much time dancing around the truth in this fic, that it was time to face it head on. So, sigh of relief, right? :)

I do think if we're honest, Rey just might have tried to sneak out if she'd woken up first - she'd been through a lot and can't blame a girl for wanting to protect herself. But luckily Ben woke up first and got a chance to tell her how he feels. <3

We're almost done and I am so grateful to each of you that's followed along so far - Thank you! And thank you ever so much to @colliderofhadron for being an amazing beta and friend on this journey and for putting up with my flighty disappearing and reappearing acts. <3 :)

"I've been waiting to break free...

Maybe you needed the same thing

Something to feel; to race through your blood

And remind you you're here; to open your eyes and look around

And see the sky when you're on the ground"

~*~*~

Six Weeks Later

In some ways, Rey had been reluctant to leave the cramped room that she had been sharing with Ben for the past few months. She had lived in a lot of places over the years but, despite the sparse and worn furniture, the dinky kitchenette and the unreliable water pressure in the shower, it had felt more like home than any other place that had once acted as a roof over her head.

Of course, it wasn't the room, but Ben, that had made her feel that way and, while they were leaving the Crait Suite Inn behind, Ben wasn't leaving her behind. They weren't leaving each other behind.

Rose had initially reacted with skepticism when Rey had told her she and Ben were getting a place together; signing a joint lease was a bit heavier than simply crashing with a guy for a while. But for all the nerves bubbling inside of Rey, all the dark whispers reminding her of previous failed relationships, of broken promises and painful goodbyes, it felt right to be moving forward with Ben. She trusted him.

Rose became considerably more chipper, however, when Rey showed up with Ben to reclaim the boxes of art supplies and clothes that she'd once asked Rose store in her closet. Rey had sheepishly apologized when she realized how large the pile had actually grown, but Rose had raised herself up on her toes to give her one of her patented bear hugs.

"You know I didn't really mind," she'd insisted. "And I'll always make room for you here if you need me."

Rey was fairly sure the warning look Rose cast in Ben’s direction was mostly in jest: they'd hung out as a group a few more times, and Rose had warmed to him over the course of their casual get-togethers. In recent weeks, Rey had made more of an effort to reach out to her friend, and gradually the social outings evolved from awkwardness into something more natural and comfortable.
Still, she appreciated her friend's loyal gesture, even if she was sure she would never need to take her up on it.

The new place wasn't anything grand. Newer and freshly painted, it was still just a nondescript box of neutral carpet and too-white walls, but it was bigger, airier and nestled in the neighborhood where both Rey and Ben had taken new jobs.

Soon enough, however, the new apartment became filled with the unavoidable chaos that abounds when two people begin to occupy the same space. Debates ensued about how and where to arrange the furniture Ben brought from his old place in Chandrila, frantic trips to Target took place in order to buy the things they discovered they were lacking, and they both bemoaned the way that no matter how many boxes they opened, the piles didn't seem to get any smaller.

The first two nights they spent in the apartment, they were too busy and tired to cook (and too many of Ben's favorite pans were yet to be unpacked) so take-outs were the order of the day. But on day three, despite the disarray (and making use of the spatula when the whisk couldn't be found), Ben cooked them their first real meal in their new place.

Rey tried not to glance at her stained fingers as they ate Ben's fancy seafood linguine from styrofoam plates (they hadn't found all the dishes yet) – she had spent the day cleaning up acrylic paint down at Nimma Art School, where she had recently taken a job as an instructor's assistant. The institute was connected to a local art museum and her new post meant she could attend classes at half-price, a perk which she was fully taking advantage of.

"How was school?" Rey asked with a teasing smile. "The other kids play nice?" It had also been Ben's first teaching day at the high school where he'd taken a new job - another event to celebrate.

The post wasn't permanent as he was simply finishing out the year for a teacher who was out on maternity leave, and Rey had not been able to help overhearing his half of the conversation with his mother on the subject; Rey had gleaned that his family wasn't exactly pleased about what seemed like a step back in status. But he had been excited about the new direction, confiding to Rey that while he had enjoyed teaching math, he had never been interested in the games and politics that went along with fighting for prestigious positions in a private university.

"It's so different from college; the students are only a few years younger but it's a whole new world," he marveled, shaking his head as he spoke. But Rey could see the light in his eyes - he truly loved what he did.

The man she'd chosen to love was still a nerd at heart, Rey reflected with her own rueful smile. Her heart rate picked up just a little as the four letter word ran through her mind, not startling her quite as much as the first time her subconscious had supplied the idea, but she was still getting used to it.

"You're a nerd," was all she said aloud however, shushing the impulse to say the rest.

"I'm not… that is..." Ben's stuttering attempt at denial was half-hearted at best.

Rey rolled her eyes a little and stretched her leg under the table to nudge Ben with her foot. "A cute nerd, don't worry. I bet all the kids have crushes on the new, hot teacher," she finished with a laugh.

Ben sputtered, coughing around the bite of noodles in his mouth as his ears turned an adorable shade of crimson.
"Did you work or have class today?" he asked, shifting the subject away from himself.

"Both. I was assisting Ms. Tano most of the morning but I sat in on a figure-drawing class in the afternoon. Sculpture and mixed media are still my preferences - I just love building something with my hands, you know? But it was nice."

"Hmm. I like what you do with your hands, too," Ben smirked, though Rey smiled softly as his blush gave away the awkwardness beneath the flirtatious comment.

"The model was pretty well-built, too. Jealous?"

He actually wasn't, not that it mattered - it was a standard drawing class and Rey was a mature student, not a nervous teenager. But she liked to tease Ben a little whenever the opportunity arose.

"No," Ben answered, and Rey knew he was being honest. After all, he was somewhat of an artist himself and knew what figure drawing classes were like, even if it had been a while.

"Would you be jealous if I were modeling?" she asked.

"I... Of course not. I mean, it doesn't mean any-" Ben said as he inhaled deeply, and Rey almost felt a little guilty as she watched him flounder between wanting to be reasonable and admitting the idea flustered him. "Did they ask if you were available to stand in?" he asked, finally stringing his words together coherently.

"No, but I could model for you," Rey answered sweetly. "You can 'draw me like one of your French girls'," she quipped.

When they were packing up the old apartment, Rey had gotten a look at Ben’s sketches from their period of spying on Poe and Kaydel and she had been surprised to discover that she featured quite heavily in his work.

The pictures were all innocent - Rey sitting cross-legged in the floor as she worked on her own projects, or slouched on the couch balancing a plate on her knees, or perched on her bike - but she'd been both embarrassed and flattered.

She briefly wondered if someone with a healthier mindset than she might have been put off by the length and the level of attention. But whether her reaction was normal or not, it made Rey feel seen and gave her a warm buzzing feeling inside. In a way, it was a comfort to realize that Ben had been fixated on her as long as she had been on him.

And maybe, just maybe, a part of her wanted him to do it, to draw her. The idea of the two of them and nothing but his pencils and paper between them held an appeal that was intimate and erotic and wholly unlike finding the lines and shadows of a model in class.

"One of these days I’ll draw you like that," he promised, his eyes dark. Rey shivered, certain that he was imagining the same scene she was.

Suddenly, she wasn't terribly interested in eating anymore.

"That reminds me of something I wanted to show you, when you’re done," she said, pushing her plate aside. She fidgeted nervously as Ben put his own utensils down and looked at her expectantly.
"Sure. What is it?"

Rey's chair scraped loudly as she pushed it back to stand up. "C'mere," she said, gesturing over her shoulder as she led the way to their new bedroom (she wasn't yet over thinking about just how much that meant to her).

Like the rest of the apartment, the room was still in a state of transition. The bed was made up and flanked by nightstands, but the closet was largely comprised of boxes of unsorted clothing.

That afternoon, she had arrived home before Ben and dragged in one more important item. Thankfully it had not been too difficult to prevent him from coming into the room to change before dinner, thus disrupting her purposeful reveal.

However, hanging up the surprise had taken a little more effort. It was heavy and cumbersome, and she desperately didn't want it to fall.

"Our walls were looking a little bare, don't you think?" she asked, not quite succeeding in keeping the nerves from her voice.

Rey watched Ben as he walked past her, eyes following the direction of her outstretched hand. The bed against the far wall was basic enough (but with a fantastic mattress - thank you, Ben and your taste for luxury) but what Rey had mounted on the wall above it, in lieu of a headboard, snatched the spotlight.

In stolen moments, Rey had finally finished her mosaic and had today placed it in a spot of honor over their bed. Ben had watched her as she worked from time to time, but she had never explained her revised intent to him, nor had he seen the final product.

"What do you think?" Rey asked, keeping her tone light. As if his reaction didn't mean the world to her.

"That's the - my Grandparents' tree, isn't it?" Ben leaned across the bed and trailed his fingers over the smooth pink and cream ceramic of the magnolia blossoms.

Rey nodded. "And those are desert dandelions," she continued, crawling onto the bed and pointing at the colorful buds below. "It…evolved…from my original plan," she explained. "It became about-"

"-us," Ben finished, his voice full of awe. His fingers trailed downwards to the roots below, twisted, glittering where the light hit the broken glass. "It's beautiful. I love it."

Ben turned to her, capturing her mouth in a fierce kiss. She laughed as they crashed down on the bed together, her giggles turning to moans as Ben attacked her lips and neck and shoulders with his mouth. Finally, he lifted his head, and met her eyes, breathing heavily.

"I love you," he whispered between heavy breaths.

Rey wasn't sure what the future held, and she didn't know if she'd ever be rid of the lingering anxieties she'd carried since childhood, but she was ready to face it with Ben by her side. She'd drifted, wandered, and searched for years, but she was finally ready to put down roots and grow something with Ben.

She held his gaze, sure and steady as she replied with her own unwavering reply: “I love you, too.”
Chapter End Notes

I know this epilogue is a little short. I've thought more about where these characters go from here: I see Rey finding a therapist to help on her healing journey, and I see Ben and Kaydel saying a more proper goodbye; I see Rey reaching out to Finn and building that friendship again, and I see Kaydel and Poe making their own fresh start.

But for One Way or Another, this felt like the right place to end the story. To say goodbye to Rey and Ben knowing that they'll be alright, and they'll continue to grow with each other.

It's almost a bit sad to hit that post button. This is the first long fic I've finished. I thank you all for reading and sticking with me and my scattered posting schedule (or lack of schedule, really). And I especially thank @colliderofhadron - the best beta around and an all around wonderful person and friend. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!